



ANTHROLATIONS



The Magazine of Anthropomorphic Dramatic Fiction

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In the Line of Duty

by MCA Hogarth

Illustrations by Mike Raabe



5

Looking Down to Camelot

by Ho U-minh Mahinda

Illustrations by Cara Mitten

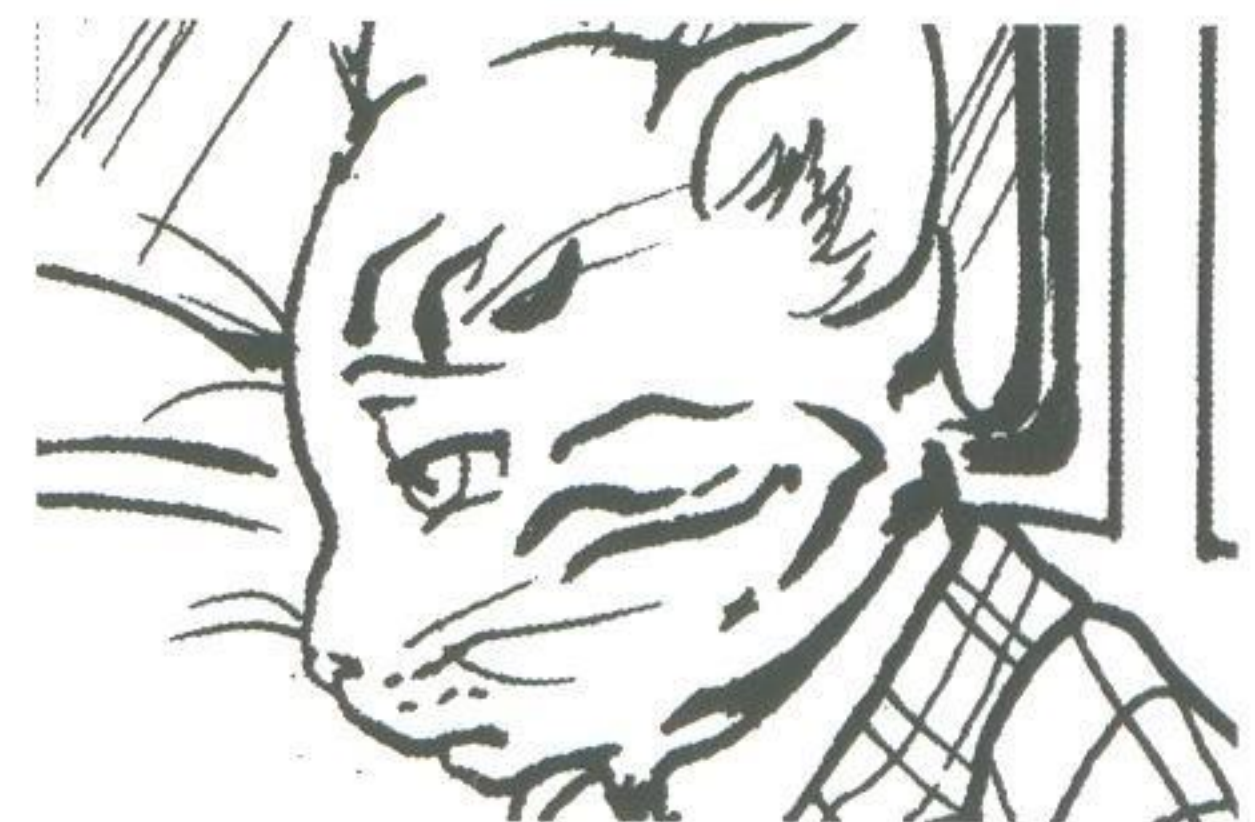


11

Onwards and Upwards

by Mike McGee

Illustrations by Aura Moser



25

Fish Gotta Swim

by Michael H. Payne

Illustrations by John Nunnemacher



31

The Last Sabretooth

by John Burkitt

Illustrations by Cara Mitten

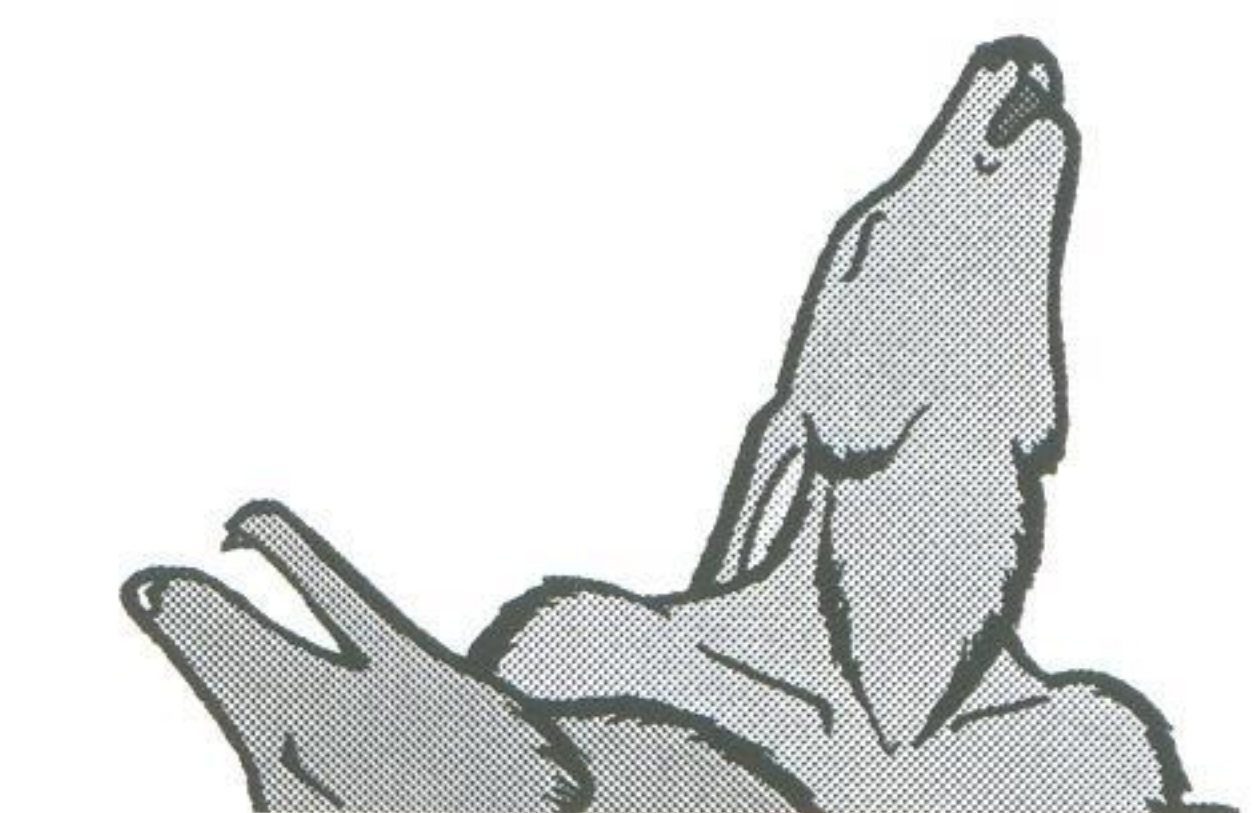


39

Golden

by Tim Susman

Illustrations by Karena Kliefoth



45



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Anthrolations welcomes submissions of fiction which feature anthropomorphic or zoomorphic characters, and explore their interaction with the characters and situations around them. The optimum story will be 3,000 to 5,000 words in length, but longer or shorter works will be considered contingent on available space. Preference is given to first-run fiction, but reprints will be considered if all applicable rights have reverted to the author.

We also welcome artists interested in preparing illustrations for accepted stories.

For more information about our guidelines and submission rates, or to purchase copies of our products, please refer to the Sofawolf Press web site.

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Welcome to the seventh issue of *Anthrolations*. As you are probably aware, it has been an entire year since our last issue—six months longer than usual. We're sorry you had to wait so long, but we think the stories within are worth the time it took to bring them to you.

This past year has been a transformational one for us, starting with the release of *Best in Show* in July. Featuring twenty-six of the best anthropomorphic stories selected from over fifteen years of print and electronic publications, this 450 page volume is a collection of a scope rarely seen in genre fiction. With informative forewords and bibliographies by editor Fred Patten, interior art from several of the original publications, and a full color cover by Ursula Vernon, it is a truly impressive anthology.

While Fred Patten, Tim Susman, and I were working hard on the final layouts for *Best in Show*, recently added Art Director, Mark Brown, was finalizing the first volume of his own landmark addition to the Sofawolf Press product line. *Artistic Visions* is a departure from our previously all-fiction focus and seeks to highlight the work of some of the best artistic talents working in or around the anthropomorphic realm. The first volume, released to great acclaim at Anthrocon in July, features the cartooning and animation style of Herbie, fresh from a key assistant animation role in the Disney feature film *Brother Bear*. Pairing Herbie's awe-inspiring artwork with the fantastic layout and design work of guest graphic artist John Nunnemacher produced a truly beautiful volume from cover to cover.

In addition to the two new products, we released the first volume of our informative newsletter called *Kibble* in June. Aside from being a good place to catch up on current and future products and convention

appearances by Sofawolf Press, each volume will feature tips and techniques designed to help writers and artists avoid some of the common pitfalls we have seen in past submissions. The newsletters are available in print at many conventions, or in PDF form on www.sofawolf.com. Look for volume number two in December!

To help with the increasing volume of submission and production editing, we have added Fred Patten and Mike Kish to the staff—both of whom were invaluable in helping bring you the issue you currently hold in your hands.

Frequent *Anthrolations* contributors M.C.A. Hogarth and Michael H. Payne both return to this issue with stories set in the blackness of space, and illustrated by Mike Raabe and John Nunnemacher respectively. Also returning in this issue is Mike McGee, with a story of a somewhat more serious nature than his past submissions, though naturally no less engaging. A new illustrator to these pages, Aura Moser, lends a hard urban edge to the story's pages.

Two new authors, John Burkitt and Ho U-minh Mahinda, get their chance to shine amongst the veterans with a touching story of last wishes and a Victorian-era supernatural whodunit. Once again we manage to convince the super-talented Cara Mitten to grace our pages with illustrations for both stories.

Last—but never least—Chief of Operations, Tim Susman, spares some time from writing and editing everything else to reprise his appearances in issues #1, #2, and #4 to bring us "Golden". Although set in a completely different universe from his previous contemporary urban dramas, animator and illustrator Karena Kliefloth again lends her vision to this story of political intrigue on the savannah.

Enjoy! We promise to try not to make you wait so long for Issue #8.





In the Line of Duty

by MCA Hogarth

illustrated by Mike Raabe

MCA Hogarth lives in stormy Florida on a plot of land owned by the neighborhood sandhill cranes. She spends days with databases and telecommunications equipment, and comes home to art sketchbooks and notebooks of poetry and fiction. Her writing has been previously published in venues like *Strange Horizons*, *Speculations* and the *Leading Edge*. You can learn more at her website, www.stardancer.org or send her e.mail at mcah@stardancer.org.

Mike Raabe is a 40 year-old illustrator living just East of Seattle, Washington. His art became a full-time career in 1993, keeping him busy with nearly 400 collector card game paintings, television storyboarding, comic books, and a lot of advertising. Mike also acts as a designer, developer, and consultant.

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Standing waist-deep in warm water, First Commander Alysha Forrest of the UAV Scattersky watched as six of the alien Platies swam in a circle around her hips. She offered her hand and felt Neon rub velvety skin against her fingers. No one quite understood how the Platies fit their sapience into their flat oval bodies; like the round and fuzzy Flitzbe, no one even understood what the Platies wanted of the Alliance. But many ships carried several Platies in their water environments anyway, and Alysha found their brilliant colors and the ripple of their skins calming.

Calm was what she needed.

A slight splash heralded the arrival of the Scattersky's Naysha lieutenant, one of the ship's navigators. Eyes the size of Alysha's fists gazed at her through the surface of the water, and then the Naysha rose far enough to give Alysha a view of her hands.

"Blood in the water," the Naysha signed, the pearly webbing between her fingers glistening.

Alysha nodded, agreeing with the sentiment. Though Kaymah could hear and understood Universal, she signed out of courtesy, and to keep up her fluency. "We're approaching the distress call's origin," she replied. "Soon we'll know."

Kaymah grinned. "Water-friends say there will be much to do. They hear great noise."

Alysha's brows lifted. She glanced at the rippling Platies. Communication had been the basis of the Platy civilization, as far as any Alliance scientist could tell. They used the dense soup of their oceans to speak over impossibly long distances through means not wholly understood. Observation had proven that the Platies had spatial and subtle senses that didn't correlate well to those of creatures descended from humans. Only the Naysha,

the experimental near-mermaid species created by the most brilliant human genetic engineer of the time, reliably bridged the gap between the minds of the Platies and those who walked on land.

"Great noise, ah?" Alysha said. She used one hand to stroke one of the aliens named Brown Burnoose for the cape-like pattern on its back, then brought her fingers back into view. Naysha Sign turned into a pidgin with only one hand. "I'll keep that in mind." She paused. "Do they understand me, Kaymah? Do you think?"

"More than others," Kaymah signed. She shrugged. "You try. You sit in the water with them. They like you."

Alysha nodded, then started as the telegem inside her ear chimed. She flicked an ear to activate it.

"Forrest here," she said aloud.

"To the bridge, Forrest."

"Aye, sir," Alysha said, pulling herself out of the water. She briskly towed off her lower body all the way to her digitigrade feet and slipped her uniform tunic over the stretchsuit.

"Good luck," Kaymah signed. "We'll await news!"

"Thank you," Alysha signed hurriedly, and ran for the nearest lift.

Alysha stared at the red line leading toward the gas giant and the hulking ship that fell so gracefully, so inexorably down it. Her hand flexed on the back of the captain's chair, but she did not speak. Only her gray ears twitched, the light blinking on the pale gold hoops threaded through them.

For once, cheerful Captain Maurbery wasn't laughing. She couldn't blame him.

"This is where the distress call led us."

"We don't appear to have much time, sir."

The Tam-illee man rubbed his chin, his much larger brown ears straining forward. He didn't look

as much like a fox as Alysha looked like a cat, but they shared their humanoid faces and ancestry in common. "No. They were planning to use the giant to aerobrake, but their navigation computer malfunctioned and they don't have the power to get off their current course."

Alysha glanced at the notes in the upper left hand 'corner' of the two-story holographic display and frowned. "They're too massy for us to haul them."

"And too fragile for us to push," Maurbery finished. "We have to evacuate them and let the ship go."

"Captain, they're answering our comm request."

"Put them through, Lieutenant."

Alysha turned her attention to the display as the vessel's trajectory was replaced with the face of a troubled human man who floated just in range of the pick-up.

"This is Headmaster Dan Hawkins of the freighter UAV Alabama... Christ, are we glad to see you people!"

"Captain Maurbery of the UAV Scattersky. It seems we're just in time to break up your party, Headmaster," Maurbery said, grinning.

"Well, the weather was gonna get a bit hot for our comfort anyway, sir," the human answered, managing a wan smile in return. "Can you help us?"

"Are your pads operational?"

"I'm afraid they aren't, Captain."

Alysha's ear flicked down at the sound of the soft and very volatile curse that escaped her captain. She said nothing and watched the human on the display. The lines around his eyes had deepened into pale creases that hadn't seen the sun that had tanned his face. His silvered beard bordered a strong chin. He didn't appear to blink often, and his obvious apprehension only intensified an already intense hazel stare.

"We're going to have to send a shuttle to get you out, then. Are you suited, Headmaster?"

From her careful scrutiny of his face, Alysha knew the answer before the human spoke.

"I'm afraid we don't have enough for everyone, sir. We've got fifteen people and twelve suits."

"We'll send some over, then. Herd your men into one place, Hawkins, and we'll get them out."

"Right away, Captain. Hawkins out."

Maurbery cursed again, louder. Alysha glanced down at him, privately sharing the sentiment. "Rescue operations are not supposed to be on a time-table with half the equipment missing!"

Alysha spoke, her alto low. "I'll have a team on it immediately. Anything else, sir?"

Maurbery managed one of his trademark chuckles, though the lines around his eyes belied

his weariness. "Thank you for keeping me sane, Forrest."

"That's my job, sir," Alysha said with a smile before heading off the bridge.

Half a mark later Alysha paid out the umbilical that attached the docking clamp on her leg to the Recurve class shuttle. She was leading the two members of the team who had followed her extravehicular; the other two sat inside the shuttle, maintaining its position relative to the falling cargo ship. They'd already padded the suits into the pressurized compartment that held the small crew of the Alabama. If only pads could create their tunnels from the receiving end as well as the initiating end, they wouldn't be outside... but there was no use wishing.

"Barnard, Flait, you hear me?"

"Clear as a summer day," came a saucy female voice over her telegem. That would be Meri Flait, the Aeran woman. Alysha had watched from the corner of her eye as the Aeran had tucked her long ears back before sealing on her suit; she hadn't envied Meri the task. Braiding her own black hair for the helmet had been inconvenience enough.

"I hear you, Commander," chimed in Barnard, the Hinichi wolfine. Alysha glanced his way as he swam slowly into the corner of her vision.

"All right, people. You know the plan. We're going to go find these people, attach the extra umbilical outside their door and shepherd them to the shuttle... and then we're going to go home and enjoy a nice shower and twelve hours of sleep."

"Aye-aye, sir!" Flait chirped.

"I'm already dreaming of a shower," Barnard muttered, his long-suffering tone communicating his facial expression as clearly as if she could see it.

Alysha grinned. "Let's get it done, then. And watch the tails."

"We're there, sir."

Alysha jetted after them, pleased at their enthusiasm. She was unnaturally aware of her own breathing, her ribcage rising and falling against the memory material that sealed the thin skin of the short-lapse EVA softsuit to her body... her very small body. The enormity of the starscape threatened her with its majesty, and she let her eyes rise up the solid wall of the gas giant, a whirling mass of brown, blood-black crimson and cream that obscured most of her field of vision. The stars that managed to win past the giant's influence were tiny opals, constant in their light. That lack of fluctuation had gratified Alysha when she'd done her first extravehicular maneuvers. It was comforting to find in a world of constant gradation something that held to its course, unwavering.

The Alabama herself was no small thing. She easily out-stripped the Scattersky in sheer mass, but while the Fleet battlecruiser was a study in purposeful, almost predatory curves, the cargo ship was a collection of vast spindles and containers, strung together with precariously thin cranes and cables. She looked incredibly fragile, coasting toward the gaseous monstrosity that had captured her.

Fully ninety-five percent of the Alabama's compartments were de-pressurized; the last five comprised her crew quarters. As a Blackspace class freighter, Alabama wasn't meant for hauling cargo that required air.

Coasting toward the bulb where the fifteen members of the Alabama crew had reported they'd gathered, Alysha used her telegem to consult a better sensor suite than the one built into her suit.

"Jason, are you still reading the heat signatures in that bulb?"

"Absolutely," came the crisp reply from the Tam-illee ensign she'd left at the shuttle's science station. "No doubting that one, sir.

They're waiting for you just as they said."

"Good," Alysha replied. "Flait, you have the extra cable?"

The shape of the Aeran female dove past her, trailing two lines like a fish with exotic white fins. Flait made light contact with the exterior of the bulb, then walked carefully on her magnetic boots to the airlock. She bent and arranged the umbilical, then stood in sharp relief against the darkness of the gas giant and waved her hands triumphantly.

Alysha chuckled and sailed after her. "We're behind you. Jason, give me a line into the Alabama."

"Patching you through, sir."

"Alabama, can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear!" The headmaster's voice held an undisguised note of relief.

Alysha slowed herself as the ship rose to meet her feet. "Headmaster Hawkins, this is First Commander Alysha Forrest. Did you receive the suits?"

"Absolutely. They're working fine."

Alysha nodded to herself, then gently touched down on the hull. The magnetic pads in her digigrade boots activated without incident and she straightened, walking over to join Flait. "My people and I are just outside the airlock with the umbilical. Please proceed through the airlock one at a time and we will guide you to the shuttle."

"On our way, Forrest."

Alysha studied the airlock. Its lights flickered from green to red, then to green again as the thick door slid back. The first of the Alabama's crew

stepped out of the airlock and hesitantly drifted out. "Flait?"

"On it, sir." The Aeran female detached herself from the skin of the ship and met the swimming civilian. Alysha watched in satisfaction as the Aeran ushered him up the cable to the shuttle's airlock. Barnard took the next and the evacuation proceeded smoothly. Alysha directed the procedure from just above the airlock on the Alabama, informing the headmaster when to send the next crew member through.

It could be that it was just another routine rescue operation and an hour from now she'd be done with the captain's debrief and in her quarters, enjoying hot coffee and a warm shower. Alysha flicked her ear, then said, "Jason?"

"Aye, sir."

"What's the estimated time before this thing goes down?"

"About an hour."

Alysha nodded and returned to her task. When Flait took the fourteenth up the cable, the First Commander said, "I'll take the last one." Cheers accompanied her to the airlock until she toggled the inside line.

"Headmaster, shall we?"

"First Commander... I would very much like to go."

Something in his tone unnerved her. "Mr. Hawkins?"

"Would you mind coming in here, ma'am?"

Ignoring the civilian title, Alysha flicked her ear to switch the telegem pasted inside to the shuttle channel. "Jason, I'm going in to talk to the Headmaster."

"Sir?"

"I shouldn't be long."

He didn't argue. Alysha keyed back to the Alabama's channel and said, "I'm outside, Mr. Hawkins."

She waited for the lock to cycle and the door to open, then unscrewed her umbilical and attached it to the hull before stepping inside. A few moments later found her inside the pressurized compartment, obviously an antechamber meant as an EVA landing. The bright light reflected too strongly against the flat white walls.

The headmaster was seated in a white chair, his helmet on his knee and his head in his hands. When she entered he glanced up, and his expression stopped her at the threshold. Alysha unlocked her helmet and tucked it beneath an arm.

"First Commander, I don't know how to say this, but... there are other people on this ship."

She bent and arranged the umbilical, then stood in sharp relief against the darkness of the gas giant and waved her hands triumphantly.

A fine sweat broke from her skin, but she remained composed. "Other people."

"I didn't find out until a few days ago. There was an accident when the things were being mounted." The human grimaced, but she didn't miss the anger that flared in his hazel gaze. "One of ours was smuggling. On my ship. Refugees from the Chatcaavan Empire. I can't say I blame him for doing it, but he never consulted me, and now that he's dead I don't know where they are. They're somewhere on the spindles."

"You've searched the pressurized areas," Alysha said, just to hear it from his mouth. The chill that had seized her spine was only deepening.

"Yes."

"That means they're in cryogenic storage, in some container in the depressurized areas," Alysha said. She refused to let the information faze her in front of the already demoralized human.

"Yes," Hawkins said.

They stared directly at one another, then Alysha flicked her telegem to the shuttle channel. "Jason."

"Sir?"

"Tell Flait to meet Headmaster Hawkins at the airlock and escort him back to the shuttle."

"Done, sir."

Alysha lifted her chin, then slowly inclined her head to the human.

He looked away, then locked his helmet on and walked to the airlock. A few minutes later, he was gone.

Alysha collapsed into the chair he'd vacated. It was still warm.

That Hawkins had admitted to the refugees amazed her. Without sufficient evidence to prove his claim that another crew member had been smuggling, it would be far too easy for him to be pinned with responsibility for the crime... yet he had not been able to leave them behind. Common decency did not always overrule fear and the survival instinct in every reasoning being, and she could not help but respect the human for his moral fortitude, particularly when faced with the messy politics involved in running illegal aliens.

Which did not change the fact that she, Maurbery, and the Scattersky were now in an untenable position.

Lifting a head that seemed far heavier than its crown of black braids, Alysha flicked on the telegem. "Jason, get me Maurbery on a secure channel."

"Aye, sir."

Her heart beat twice before the Tam-illee captain said, "Forrest? What's going on? Why are you still in there?"

Alysha paused, choosing her words carefully. "Captain, we have a situation."

"A what? Dammit, Forrest, we don't have time for situations."

"Sir, there's live cargo on board."

Absolute silence across a comm-line wasn't entirely possible, even with Alliance technology. Alysha closed her eyes and listened to the almost inaudible crackle of the universe's background radiation. Her back ached.

"Give me the full story, now, Commander."

"One of their crew was smuggling refugees. They're in cryogenic suspension and hanging somewhere on one of the spindles. Hawkins didn't know where."

"On one of the spindles? Exposed to space? To any passing meteorite or piece of space dust that wanted to burrow through the shields?"

Alysha grimaced. "We can only assume that they're loaded somewhere near the protected sides of the ship. Sir, we can't tow it. If we break it apart, we risk killing them until we know where they are. And we can't push it for the same reason. We've got to get search parties out here."

"We've got half an hour before that thing sinks too low to get anyone safely away, Forrest. I don't think that's enough time."

The statement hung between them. Alysha bared her teeth in the solitude of the silent white room. "Sir, we can't leave them there. We're Fleet."

A pause. Then: "Fifteen minutes, Forrest. Fifteen minutes, and no more. Use the shuttle you've already got. And when I tell you to jump you'd better be out of there or I'll have your guts for garters. Do you understand me?"

"Absolutely," Alysha said, already screwing her helmet back on and stepping into the airlock.

"Yeah, well, Iley speed, damn you."

Alysha grinned and replied, "Forrest out, sir." She switched channels immediately as the airlock cycled open. "Jason! I need you to scan for additional life signs through the spindles, particularly ones that look slow or dim. Anything that looks suspicious. And give me a report on the areas of this hulk that would be best protected from wayward encounters with free-floaters."

"On it, sir." His puzzlement was obvious, but she'd successfully communicated the urgency in her voice. "It looks like the best places within the shields are only a few minutes down the hull from the pressurized compartments."

"It's my lucky day," Alysha said. She detached herself from the hull and reconnected the umbilical, then jetted down the axis of the ship. "Keep scanning for those signs, please."

"I'm not reading anything, sir."

"Just keep looking."

“Yes, sir.”

The ghostly pallor of the ship as it flowed beneath her sent renewed chills down her spine. The spindles and their mounted containers were haphazardly attached to the ship; smaller racks descended into recesses so dark she could only barely see the stars at their ends, while others thrust out at ungainly angles against the gas giant’s unstable backdrop. The enormity of her task finally struck her as she passed hundreds and hundreds of cargo containers, each of them big enough for at least four people. Some of them were large enough to sleep forty.

Alysha coasted to a halt beside one of the wind-mill arms, each of its containers the size of rail cars. “Jason? I could use some data about now.”

“Sir, I’m looking all over, but I can’t find a thing. I can’t even make anything up with these readings.”

Were they all dead? Or was it just bad luck that the shuttle couldn’t pick out the faint pulse of cryogenic sleepers? Alysha glanced over the edge of the ship and noticed how immediate, how malevolent the gas giant appeared. Was it closer? Or was that her imagination?

Alysha took a breath and chose a random corridor, then dove down it. She employed her suit sensors as the containers flashed past her in the stark chiaroscuro of space. She tasked herself to patience, to calm thought, and gave each as thorough an examination as she could. She was halfway down the corridor when Jason interrupted.

“Sir, we’ve got a burst from the Scattersky. Maurbery says you need to head back in two minutes.”

“Two minutes is not enough,” Alysha said, not allowing the conversation to distract her from her scrutiny of the current container. Calm, like the Platies in water. “Tell him I need more time.”

Jason sounded uncertain. “Sir, I don’t think...”

“I need more time, Ensign! Forrest out!”

Cutting off the link left her alone with the sound of her own swift breathing and the pain in her clenched gut. There was no question that she should obey orders, that there was no way a single person could canvass the entire cargo ship in time. No sensors, no matter how modern, could pick out the life signs of sleepers in close proximity to something as loud as a gas giant. But something in her couldn’t give up. Alysha swam down the corridor, gritting her teeth.

Her telegem flared back to life. “Dammit, Forrest, don’t play games with me!”

“Sir, I can’t let it go.”

“You’ll do what I tell you to, and you’ll do it immediately or I’ll have them reel you back in by that umbilical!”

“Just a few more minutes, sir! Please.”

The pause before Maurbery’s reply gave her time to slip through the gap created by an empty spindle into the next row. She waded up through it, hauling the cable behind her.

“Alysha, listen to me. You can’t do it. No one could. We found out too late. There’s no use dying with them.”

It was so reasoned, his voice so understanding that she almost gave in. “I’ll be up in a few more minutes, Captain.”

“You’ll be up now. I’m calling back the umbilical.”

The tug at her leg was unmistakable. Startled, Alysha stared at it as it began to drag her back. Then, with a calm she almost couldn’t believe of herself, she reached down and unscrewed it. The tension in the cable vibrated through her wrist until the end popped off the dock in her suit and spun away. She spared it only a moment’s glance as it vanished, then redoubled her efforts.

“Forrest!”

The thunder in his voice would have made her regret her action had she not been so intent on her goal.

Softer then, “Curse you to the last level of Hell, Alysha. You’d better know what you’re doing.”

“I hope so too,” Alysha murmured, staring at the vast collection of cargo containers. She struggled for calm, but the only answer that rose from her still center was that she should give up. Only an esper could possibly find the sleepers in time. And even then they couldn’t give her reliable directions to the containers.

Unless they understood those things instinctively.

“Jason!” Alysha exclaimed. “Get someone into the water with Kaymah and the Platies. Fast! Tell them I need to find some sleepers.”

“Aye, sir,” the ensign said, voice trembling.

Her heart fluttered as she waited, and then a sharp soprano spoke. “This is Lieutenant Avery at the water environment.” A pause. “Kaymah says head down the z axis about fifty feet.”

Her suit compass was synchronized to the Scattersky’s. Alysha consulted it and sped down the open corridor.

“Northwest. About twenty feet.”

She spun and headed that way. Her breathing had accelerated... she wondered if the heat was real or something she’d conjured.

“Down again, another forty feet. Kaymah says, ‘What are you facing?’”

“Six cargo containers,” Alysha reported, trying for briskness instead of fear. “Tilted up twenty degrees. Lying on the western plane. Behind them another six. And another six behind those.”

Maurbery's voice cut through the channel. "Forrest, dammit, another five minutes and we won't be able to get you out of there!"

Avery's soprano: "The row behind the one you're looking at. That's the one. The Platies are sure of it. They're swooping around—"

"Forrest!"

Alysha dove for the base of the second row's axle. "I think I've found them, sir." The heat was no longer her imagination, but she ignored it to struggle with the controls that worked the mounts. She managed to start the unload routine and held her breath until the series of lights steadied and the machinery spun up. "Captain, they should be coming off. Hitch them."

"What about you?"

What indeed? Alysha stared up at the distant stars, felt anew the heat that had seemed so far away a few minutes ago. On an impulse, she leaped onto the last container and activated the magnetic pads on her soft-suit, clinging to the container with open arms. Her speeding heart began to slow, and she had time to wonder at this unnatural calm before her container slid down the axle toward the dismount point and shot into space.

Alysha hung on, closing her eyes as her container cartwheeled away from the Alabama. No one had ever researched the effects of a hitch on a suited individual, but it didn't seem important. When she was sure she wasn't going to vomit, she cracked her eyes apart and found the cargo ship. Its acceleration differed enough from hers that she could actually see it falling toward the giant. A shudder wracked her body.

"Forrest? Are you still out there?" The panic in Maurbery's voice jarred the entire situation into perspective and Alysha bit her teeth against another wave of nausea.

"Sir," she managed after a moment. "I'm here. On the last container."

"We're sending the shuttle out for you. I'm going to flay you alive, Commander."

"At least I'm alive to flay," Alysha managed wanly, and the sound of Maurbery's reluctant chuckle forced a small smile from her lips.

Two marks later in the Medplex, Alysha weakly propped herself up on her elbows as the captain entered. Maurbery stopped at the foot of her bunk, legs spread and arms folded over his chest. His dark brown ears were practically sealed to his skull, and fire lit his green eyes from within. Alysha met his gaze and waited for him to speak first, determined not to let his patent wrath sway her

from observing proper military courtesy. She was faintly aware that the neat braids that had wound around her head had come undone and untidy wisps of black hair framed her face; she wished she'd had time to groom.

"Consulting the Platies and the Naysha for help saved your life," Maurbery said, and the statement was so far from what Alysha had been expecting to hear that she finally found herself off-guard.

"Sir?"

The Tam-illee didn't so much as twitch a nostril as he went on. "Saved your life, because from what I could see you would have searched that whole damn ship on your own until you fell into that monster. Against my specific orders."

That did not seem to invite a reply. She looked at the blanket in her hand until Maurbery wrenched her head around to meet his green eyes. She hadn't even noticed him drawing nearer—and now, confronted with his gaze she trembled, shocked at the implacable anger, the concern so obvious on his open face. Disarmed, Alysha stared at him.

"If you ever disobey orders like that again, Forrest, I will personally bust you down to ensign so hard there won't be any cheek left for you to fall on. Is that understood?"

The last three words hissed from his mouth, and she could only manage a weak, "Yes, sir."

She reeled when he let go, pulling the sheets closer. To have a superior officer touch her so flagrantly was so unusual that the warning echoed all the way into her bones. She watched with wide eyes as Maurbery strolled to the door, the appearance of calm restored, before turning back.

"You got them all out, by the way. All 1200."

"All twelve... hundred?" she asked, stunned.

"Hawkins wasn't sure how many they took, but Lieutenant Kaymah reports that 1200 is it. There'll probably be a commendation in it for you." Maurbery grinned, eyes narrowed. "But for now, you will rest. Radiation poisoning is nothing to sniff off. And that is an order, Commander. I expect to be obeyed."

"Aye, sir," Alysha replied. And stared after him after he'd left.

A commendation? It hardly seemed real. But twelve hundred refugees, fleeing an Empire known for its capricious cruelty, now free to pursue their own lives....

Alysha lay down. She turned gingerly onto her side and slid a hand beneath the pillow, and smiled.

No one had ever researched the effects of a hitch on a suited individual, but it didn't seem important.



Looking Down to Camelot

by Ho U-minh Mahinda

illustrated by Cara Mitten

Ho U-minh Mahinda has been a member of Row-brazzle and published art and fiction with both Shanda Fantasy Arts and United Publications, but has yet to write a novel, earn a PhD or achieve samadhi. His last job involved tutoring at Universiti Malaya, where he studies.

Cara Mitten is a frequent contributor to Anthrolations, and has most recently been doing illustration work for White Wolf and TSR/Wizards of the Coast. She lives in Athens, GA with a snake and multiple birds. Much more of her artwork can be found online at <http://www.yerf.com/mittcara>.

When she turns the bedclothes for the millionth time, delicate rump hovering unawares above his couch, the vision dries his mouth and recalls the overheated throbbing to his head and chest and trousers. Every night the feelings are new—in the waking world he no longer remembers them. And pausing momentarily he sees, with mild surprise, that his hand is already wrist-deep in the lady's modest bosom.

There is a squealing in his ear.

And then he is a crumpled heap on the bedclothes, laughing and coughing intermittently and trying to hold the slippery nymph in his grasp. He plants a wet, boozy kiss to silence her. Followed by—

"No!" she says, clutching his hands and glancing furtively doorwards. "It's early yet—they'll hear us."

"So what?"

The lady shifts, skips from the couch and peers through the opening, down the twilight servants' hall at the mantel-lamp and back up the landing. Satisfied, she eases the door on its hinges and turns the latch.

Then she finds him asleep.

"Hey!" she cries. "You! What have you brought me?"

"You mercenary tart!" he replies, springing off the sheets into the wardrobe. "Let me show you, then. A something for my beautiful Nerys..."

"You'd better not be naked in there."

"I thought you liked that," he says.

And he is back with a package of string and sack-cloth, grinning expectantly. "Open it!"

Nerys obliges him.

Three folds of hemp reveal a delicate paper lining that smoothes itself at a touch. The inner wrap tears suddenly, and she starts.

"Why," she says. "Varunasin silk."

He kisses her ear and snatches the bundle from her. It unfurls itself, growing four, seven, nine feet of scintillating red gauze above him, hovering as he skips from floor to bed to sideboard trailing it aloft, and settling at last beside the silent woman perched on the bed-side.

"For you," he says. "And," he adds, "—it's not available in retail."

"Where—"

"Nothing to it," he explains, assuming the casual tone he adopts when praise is forthcoming, "—just a matter of contacts. You know my father's head of diplomatic security? I got to know the Varunasin retainers. There was a silk farmer among them, I think, with a sample of his goods..."

"Father Timon wouldn't approve," says Nerys, frowning at the cloth. "He'd have a word or two about blasphemy..."

"If I cared about 'blasphemy', love, I wouldn't do this," he says, fumbling for her bosom. Nerys preserves her modesty in silk, but she smiles, winningly.

"It's beautiful,luv. Fit for a lady."

"We'll make you the gown you wanted," he wheedles. "Silken gown with a trim of brocade on the collar, and cuffs..."

"I wouldn't know what to do with it, Will."

"Then," he replies, wetting his lip, "—a little silken slip, for bed-time..."

He delights himself, eyeing the slender female, and dreams of swelling the populous rank and file of his noble house...

But only in dreams. So it isn't without a pang of regret, and maybe a drop of steam that obscures and compels him to brush an eye, coolly as he can manage, while he laughs and fondles the scarlet silk between them and says, "Dealing with the Varunasin's delicate work, you know. Afterwards



Illustration by Cara Mitten

we'll be set, but it takes a while... Some things are better settled first, hey?"

But afterwards... afterwards never came. When he awakens, tired, old, in pain from the hideous swelling of his wrists and knees, the memory of she who never left him burns like dappled light on sand, and for a moment he believes in joy again. His breeches are wet and clammy, but it's only the flood of his incontinence.

❧
December 1897—The Tower of London, flint at the heart of the city expanding in massive, concentric arcs, drew the eye for miles. It was also one hell of a tourist spot, thought Basil, contemplating the artists and vendors flogging their merchandise: ceramic models of the imperial seat, in scale, or charcoal portraits pasted on boards of a pale, yellowing canvas. Rain on the cobble-stones, and rank, industrial sewage in the River. Basil brushed his nose and gripped the saddle-leathered valise beside him.

It was time for work—or at least the semblance of it. Hurrying down the avenues swerving to miss collision with punters, fishwives and guardsmen, he thought, was little different from standard patrol really. Only he wasn't equipped. In a frost-proof coat that sported, on its sleeves, patches marking his rank of Constable and current leave-of-absence, Basil was on holiday. But a good show was in order, Sgt. Baker had warned, if they wanted the annual programme to stick. (Heads on the Revenue Board were making a ruckus, so—watch out!)

Twenty men from Greenwich were sent up to the northern counties, and likewise a score of northerners, Basil among them, were sent for a week in the capital—expenses *gratis*.

It was an exchange, and a holiday. So. The first thing he realized, awakening on the train, was that his companions had left him. Now the carriage boasted a row of hollow seats and trunk-racks, growing steadily cold in the absence of red-faced moustachioed policemen hot on their flasks of tea and paper-parcelled sandwiches. They had exchanged the briefest of glances, Basil and the officers, but otherwise their habitual coldness had asserted itself.

Basil had learned not to question this. It wasn't a *fully* enlightened age yet.

So he proceeded, barely containing himself and clapping eyes on the Yard, at last, that fine winter's afternoon. He found the officers in the courtyard and joined them discreetly from

behind. There the proceedings were flawless—bags were delivered to barracks and every man was assigned an escort, volunteers from the Force who'd show them a thing or two about big-city policing...

Basil's escort didn't turn up. Not at the Yard, and not at the Archives, where he *should've* been, said the relief officer. Stalled on his beat at the derelict estate. I'll find it, said Basil, noting the officer's need for a holiday himself.

Leaving the high-street plazas behind he arrived on the grounds of a manor, grey and crumbling, behind the bars of a cast-iron rail. It was curious; guardsmen flanked the entranceway, curtly instructing passers-by to continue—a dozen of their number shifted across the grounds, prodding as they went—here and there a flash of blue in the undergrowth. Private detectives among them, retainers of a noble house by their clothes.

"I'm here for Officer Krychek," said Basil, regretting every bit of his nuisance. They waved him in.

The interior was dilapidated—only the most extensive repairs might've restored it now. But it had been grand once: cornices with a trace of gold in the cracks, and fluted pillars flanking the hall, leading to an entranceway framed in cherry-blossom. Mid-century design, thought Basil—by a patron versed in exotic motifs and able to meet the cost. The walls were tiled, and behind the entrance rose a bifurcating stairway to the upper floor, railed in whimsical schools of cast-iron lotuses. Here was a pale-faced watchman, stroking his nose—a couple of medics from the Council Infirmary—and one policeman.

It was Basil's liaison, Krychek. Wearing the leather baldrick of the Avian Light Brigade and pecking himself distractedly. He was huge—a trans-Darwinian joining of kestrel blood and Varunasin blasphemy. Someone had poured considerable art into his speckled plumes and all his hollow bones. But he looked nice.

"It's a bad time," said Basil, "—I'm sorry." "Not to be helped," said Krychek, looking up. He studied Basil without contempt. "Detective Basil of the Sheffield Constabulary. Well met." They shook, wing-in-palm, over a heap that Basil observed, bemusedly, was a corpse under a dusting-sheet.

"I think," said Basil, nodding at the proceedings, "—I *hope*—you had a go at the place before this lot."

"Assailant was human male, twenty years his junior, acquainted with the deceased. Some sort of quarrel—no obvious motive at this time."

"Just barely," said the kestrel. "I combed things before it got bad. Nothing."

"Have you notified the SPR?" Basil trailed off. "Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to intrude. I'm not supposed to."

"—Except at my discretion," said Krychek. "And you're welcome! I'm looking forward to sharing notes—tell me what you make of this."

He shifted, hooking the covers deftly back with a claw. Basil twitched with interest. It was an elderly nobleman, grey-haired and whiskered—head askew with a knob of bone protruding.

"That was careless of him," said Basil, glancing up the stairs.

"Hardly," Krychek said. "He was assaulted. Assailant was human male, twenty years his junior, acquainted with the deceased. Some sort of quarrel—no obvious motive at this time."

"I'd like to hear your preliminaries," Basil requested.

"Nothing to it," said Krychek, beak curved in the Avian manner of grinning. "We got the assailant already—statement, epidermal smear records, etc. He surrendered himself—do you think remorse?"

Basil replied with a non-committal sniff. Like most Varunasin constructs, the Avians had a working knowledge of human psychology, but the core of *hominid* intellect lay beyond them. (Likewise the reverse, but such opinions were never volunteered.)

Krychek nodded off-handedly at the corpse. "The Hon. Lord Gregory Cain. Late of the world under Heaven, and the House of Cain. Can't say I know the fellow, but his assailant... well, it was his *son*. The Hon. Lord William—*him* I'm familiar with. They came to inspect the manor last night and quarrelled or something. Here's the result."

"Sounds watertight," Basil said wistfully.

"Yes. I've a shift at the Archives, then we can eat," said the kestrel. "There're places you don't want to be missing, while in town..."



"...Like Newgate to begin with. Our oldest incarceration unit for the City and boroughs. I think the Sheffield Magistrate's Chambers are the same?"

Basil nodded absently. The prison was much like the Chambers, in fact—a similar fusion of pragmatism and red tape, keenness of uniform tempered by rank under-garments and wilting epaulettes stashed in the dress-room. Only the structure was distinct, composed of the grey-brick masonry common to pre-Victorian forts of the period. There was a standard officers' mess, inner

courtyard for exercise and numerous briefing and seminar chambers for debate.

Trailing the ardent kestrel and counting the finer points of weaponry, through the ranks of guardsmen and clerics, Basil felt a *paw* land softly on his back.

"Excuse me."

It was a wolf. Parti-coloured and harnessed in strips of a heavy brown leather, it blinked and eyed Basil suspiciously when he turned. The alarm was mutual.

"I'm looking for Officer Krychek," said the wolf, composing himself.

"That'll be me," said the kestrel.

"Officer, I speak for the House of Cain. Where is the Hon. Lord William?"

"In a holding-cell, I'd imagine," said Krychek. "Mister...?"

"Greyfuss," nodded the wolf. "Steward to the House of Cain. How is the Baron?"

"He's on counsel, if that's what you're asking. Otherwise —"

"That won't be necessary, officer. Lockwood and Eadon will advise him."

Krychek shrugged. "As you wish. Insp. Moore's presiding over this—you'll want to see him."

Greyfuss bowed near-imperceptibly, and turned to display his massive lupine flanks like a grey-pelted battleship. Assiduous yellow eyes locked Basil in their sights.

"They let your kind in the Force now," he said. "Interesting."

And he withdrew. Krychek tapped Basil with his wing. "Shall we proceed?"

Basil nodded dumbly.



Banquet-night descends on the House of Cain.

Guardsmen walk in festive uniform, sporting their lanyards and collar-pins under orders of Disraeli himself. And the royal palace, gleaming with a thousand electric lights so intense it casts a spectral golden blaze on the clouds, welcomes the Varunasin ambassador and his retinue.

Down on the Cain estate, by the outskirts, the spectacle is re-enacted in miniature. Plywood lamps are set to burn afloat on the lakes, bobbing incessantly as they go; gold-laced saffron banners sway from the forest of oak, pine and maple, and on the manor porch a cluster of jade-encrusted Aeolian chimes mark the hour. Lord Gregory's private collection of oils, porcelain and sable rugs is brought to the dining-hall, as are some of the finest polyalloy swords, scalpels, cutlasses, halberds, axes and arrowheads from the armoury. The kitchen delivers a fleet of dishes, each on a trencher above a lattice of ice or flame, depending

on its temperament. Most ambitious of all is a sideboard of Varunasin recipes: glutinous dairy rice-balls—marinated fowl sautéed in a cloying brown sauce—salads of finely-shredded turnip, cucumber, carrot, onion and parsley with a dish of whipped vinegar-and-eggs on the side—a whimsical platter of butter-fried peanuts encased in a webbing of hand-spun crystal sugar. All this, arranged in the dining-hall on rosewood, attended by the comeliest female crew in livery—and it is well that the Hon. Lord Gregory picked them himself, for he will find, as the evening progresses, that Mr. Vega the silk farmer has a roving eye, and after imbibing his twelfth glass of Beaujolais, is not above groping the occasional splendid rump that presents itself. Some things are inter-cultural, after all.

The visitors want for nothing; so when a fierce wind erupts from the east, wrecking the lamps on the water, and thunderous black shadows hide the moon and cause the grounds to vanish, no-one is troubled by it. And it is a little past one o'clock, well into the eighth round of bawdy songs provided by Mr. Vega, that the young Master William—heir to the barony—excuses himself to the privy and the chamber-pot.

In sleep, the details come back to him in a sea of textures. The valiant, drunken fumbling with his pants, and the smell of urine made strange by foreign spices. Then the quick, furtive climb up the servants' stairs to Nerys. And the laughter.

He finds the horrid thing gambolling between her legs. Wedge-faced and brown like a coarse doormat, leering with a sharp, unnatural eye that fields his gaze with a freak intelligence of its own. And she is laughing—not at the creature, for nothing in its form can inspire mirth, but in response to it. He raises a foot to crush the pointed skull against the linoleum—

"Watch your step!" she screams, clutching the squirming brown length against her bosom. The bliss on its face doesn't bear describing. "You don't want to be hurting your father's guest," she says.

"A good morning to you, Master Will," says the creature. "Shouldn't you be dining?"

He swallows the rising bile inside him and smothers the fire-ants on his neck. "Good morning," he replies. "Father didn't tell me you—that Mr. Vega had friends with him."

"I beg your pardon," it says, "—but I am not that fat impotent's companion. Heaven forbid!"

"Surely you arrived with him?"

"Surely, young master, but I will not be leaving with him. I go where I choose."

Nerys runs a hand on the creature's flanks. "He's delightful! Fit for a lady's boudoir."

"And so I am, maiden! I am the Mudlark, the Singing Mongoose, friend of Queens and princes!"

"Gef's been to see her," says Nerys.

"Who?"

"Who else? At the palace! You should've come sooner, Will, and listened to his stories... I never would've thought the like of his country, if he hadn't said!"

He—it—is squirming now, twitching a spray of whiskers in every direction. And there are footsteps...

Heavy and imperious, they climb up the servants' stairs and down the hall towards them. Under the pinewood arch, with the family crest in gold on the wainscots, come the Hon. Lord Gregory Cain and his retinue.

"Father," says Will.

Lord Gregory stops in feigned surprise. "Mr. Gef!" he says, "I never expected you here!" He throws a bitter glance at his son, with unfeigned revulsion. As opposed to you, he thinks.

The mongoose has gone perversely silent—now it climbs the bodice of squealing Nerys, and buries itself in the ringlets of her hair. The Hon. Lord Gregory plucks the squirming brown muff away, but not before touching her midriff, and casting a look of hateful realization that drains her colour.

In memory, here is where it ends. Realization, a promise, and death.



Basil was alone again. But he'd seen quite enough of the city. It was snowing, large idle flakes that fell and sludged beneath the urban traffic, on the cobbles. He had joined the kestrel at Council Archives today, where Krychek did a turn as archivist three times a fortnight. And it was dark now—only a quarter past five and lamps were coming up on the shop-fronts. The sky held a uniform, luminous red—no wind, and night-life was springing from every door: loners like himself—ferrets and foxes spoiling for trouble—a mastiff doorman-cum-bouncer. Very enticing. But nothing, he thought, like the red-decked floor of Lord William's derelict house, where a detective of nimble step might spend his hours perusing the marble cracks to find, perhaps, some manner of evidence pertaining to motive and criminal wrath...

He could see it down Mossfit Avenue now, crowning a gentle slope dulled in snowfall. It was quite the fashion among nobles, Basil understood, to own a patch of town—so why the neglect? Somewhere behind came a scream that grew to a raucous, barking laugh. Basil swallowed guiltily and walked, killing his impulse to seek and resolve as he went, so proving (perhaps) that a northern constable might do one better than

some of the Met Police, and finding despite his best intentions that Mossfit Avenue now seemed the easiest path through the ice...

The capital wasn't his business, he reminded himself. Had Trace Forensics swept the manor yet? Or did Insp. Moore see fit to—

Crash! into a snow-bank. Basil felt a hail of ice on his cheek.

"No tramps."

A lady retreated into the nearby pub.

"Speak for yourself!" said her missile.

It—he—sat dejectedly, rubbing himself and uttering all manner of language.

Basil stared. It was a ferret—no, a *mongoose*—weasel-thin and flicking the snow from his coarse, brown back.

Basil strode up.

"Spot of trouble?" he said.

"The usual," grumbled the creature. He stared on catching sight of Basil. And then, more deferentially, "No trouble, sir."

Basil shrugged and left him.

"I couldn't help noticing," said the mongoose, grinning affably and sidling up behind, "—you ain't the *local* sort o' constable. And I notice," he said, "—you're headed down a nasty patch of streets... I'm headed that way myself—could use the *company*."

Basil sighed.

"Could be we've got the same stopping-place," said the mongoose. "What's yours?"

They halted, and Basil saw the derelict manor was closer now—only a couple hundred yards off. Soiled, sequestered and hiding a possible batch of marks to explain the previous night's trouble. *Krychek's* trouble, he remembered; uselessly pursued at night, and he hadn't a lamp or tools. The creature tut-tutted in his ear.

"Bad place," he said, following Basil's nose. "I reckon you heard already—stories to make your tail go limp, among other things—ha ha!"

The derelict manor followed them, peeking continually down avenues as they went. Basil glared back, and the mongoose, for all his chatter and chattering in the wind, couldn't fail to notice.

"Bad place," he said again. "Murder."

Basil jumped.

"Many a hole I'd take in a pinch," said the animal, "—but not that'n. Not for every last tart in Bakewell."

"Tell me," said Basil.

"What, right now? I'd be doing you a disservice, sir, if I told!"

"Oh?"

"A disservice," said the mongoose. "Why, the Parliament's a whistle down the street now! If you've a mind to *stories*, sir, it's the Parliament you're wanting all right! There's a brilliant chap dazzles 'em with his repertoire, come nightfall..."

"You."

The creature bowed. "Mr. Gef," he said, grabbing Basil's limb in a sudden display of brotherhood. "And," he added, "—for a token sum I can divulge all manner o' *specialties* I reserve for associates... Look!"

The Parliament of Rooks stood in a ground of arbour'd lanes—barren now, but plant-work was evidently in progress. The building was a granite construction sporting

turrets of varying height, and the largest featured a balcony that served as a second frontal entranceway. Basil and Gef proceeded through the gates, past a falcon doorman. The interior,

Basil found, was composed entirely of wood—floor-to-ceiling wainscots (and the height was considerable, some seventy feet or so); a massive central airway cleared of obstruction and lit intermittently

with drop-braziers; and numerous wooden platforms against the walls, built on varying levels and accessible to the earth-bound by narrow and precarious-looking stairwells.

It was a public-house for the Avian folk of London, maybe the first. Certainly the first Basil had seen—the platforms, he observed, had Avian seating facilities. There were tables at ground-level too, filling the central recess and buzzing with patrons of the wingless sort, folk who took the occasional free-falling feather with good grace. Basil spotted a noble or two among them.

"Heating expenses must be murder," he said. "And speaking of which—"

A sparrowhawk landed beside them, wearing the bevelled harness of a waiter, and clicking expectantly.

"Last night, three o'clock? I was using the privy out back, an' there was a yell come hollering down the street from the baron's place," Gef hurriedly said. "Wind carried it, clear as moonlight. Be seeing you."

He vanished.

"Sir?" said the sparrowhawk.

"I'm expecting someone," Basil answered absently. He stared after Gef's emaciated form hurrying to the bar.

Someone whistled above them. It was Krychek, waving and dropping heavily from a platform.

The first Varunasin visitors returned with a flying pig, and were burned alive on their ship prior to landing, lest the impossible occur.

"Basil," Krychek said, "—the old manor: it's Lord William's property now, but you know who commissioned the place? *Disraeli*."

Basil stared.

"—Under direction from the Queen, as a gift for the Varunasi Empire. Guess what they called it?—*Auric House*, 'being the extra-national property of parties forementioned' etc. etc. And something else.

"The manor," said Krychek, "—was the first Varunasin embassy."



Varunasi was a land of shameless blasphemy.

Not only were her natives staunch Darwinists, but they practised the edicts of their master, Mr. Erasmus, and bred the foulest monstrosities ever to walk the land of God.

The Industrial world never called to port on her shores—all that her people required was *grown*. Samples of animal flesh and fluids were brought to ground on her golden promontories, lovingly entombed in boxes of ice, sawdust and pine. Her science-priests received them—masters of husbandry and the occult, their long, thin fingers grasping and probing the new flesh, they hurried away to their pits of glass and fire to spawn fabulous new creatures for their amusement.

There were creatures for food and drink. Creatures for transport. Creatures for battle and love. Creatures to suck the mould and waste from the waterways, for it was known that all the major towns of the island-state were *aquapoli*, much like Venice.

The first Varunasin visitors returned with a flying pig, and were burned alive on their ship prior to landing, lest the impossible occur. Further marine incursions from Europe were less dramatically received when they got home, though a fine of six thousand guineas was levelled by the Archbishop of Canterbury on all who carried the Varunasin devil-spawn to England. Most nations of Christendom followed his lead. It was a dark time for the children of Varunasin husbandry.

Until Gef, the talking mongoose.

Powdered white and disguised as a mink stole, he was smuggled into the palace by a Lady of Court (who shall go unnamed), whereupon he lost himself in the massive wine-cellars of the royal seat. When a footman and pastrycook discovered him, he had uncorked twenty-eight barrels of stout and was singing *Rule Britannia* in a shrill, mustelid tenor. The commotion that followed drew Her Majesty, who took an instant liking to the wedge-faced creature. The powder that disguised him became a blackish mud, com-

binning with the stout—and given the fortuitous discovery of his singing, that so amused the young Queen, he was named The Mudlark and granted absolution for his blasphemous origin.

So began the acceptance of Varunasin hybrids in Europe. The rest is myth.



"Varunasi's never *had* an embassy," said Basil. "Not in the city. That's why assorted members of court drop by every ten years..."

Krychek shrugged. Watching the kestrel eat, thought Basil, was rather a new experience. Dinner arrived in small covered dishes, the only utensil a triple-pronged fork, for himself. Krychek's dinner tried to flee every time he lifted the covers.

"That's not the story," said the kestrel. "Auric House was auctioned twenty years ago, by the Council. Lord Gregory made it his summer house."

"Why?"

"I expect he wanted a place for parties or something..."

"I mean," Basil said patiently, "—how come the Varunasin delegates lost it? What about their embassy?"

"That," Krychek explained, "—is *not* in the Archives."

"Wouldn't you know," sighed Basil.

"Who was that fellow, anyway?"

"Mr. Gef. Claims he heard something down the manor last night. Wanted some, uh, remittance for his trouble."

Krychek shook his head. "Never trust a hybrid of the First Wave, they're not made for reality. What did he say?"

Basil blinked. "A yell, he said. There's more, but he'll get back when he's ready..."

The kestrel laughed. "When he's made something up, you mean. I had a run-in myself today—guess who turned up at Archives?"

"Hmm?"

"Greyfuss the steward. He of the fangs and lawyers."

Basil whistled.

"The same. Came to offer all the help we want."

"He told you that? At the Archives?"

Krychek shrugged. "Seemed like a pretty decent sort, actually. Spared no expense to clear his boss. Lord William must have a pretty good pension-plan in his service..."

"Hm."

"*Hm* indeed! Anyway, he told me why Auric House is ruined..."

"I was wondering that myself."

"Don't wonder with your mouth full," said Krychek, "To wit: it's ruined because his lordship can't pay the bills." The kestrel leaned furtively closer. "Lord William's in the armour trade—I know because he lost an account with the Met Police Force eight months ago. He might be a noble, but folk say his pocket's a hole..."

"Doesn't look good," said Basil.

"The manor's been abandoned for years. It's also set for the market, I heard..."

"So William and his father Gregory made a quick, pre-sale inspection—"

"Exactly."

"—three o'clock last night."

Krychek blinked. "How'd you know?"

"Spook told me," said Basil. "Actually, it was Mr. Gef..."

But they found (on calling for the bill) that Gef had abandoned the premises.



It is not a story he witnessed, but in sleep the echoes come from unvisited places. So he watches them, eyes twitching beneath their paper lids.

Summer wanes and twilight draws apace on the continent. The Hon. Lord Gregory holds watch on the battlements, scouring the grass of Auric House a hundred feet below. His son, the errant Master William, reviews the latest studies in Varunasin protocol. And Nerys?—what is the mistress of the oat-sowing miscreant doing now?

Nerys is rooting through his lordship's vault.

And it's well that she finishes, swings the massive iron facade home again and manoeuvres through the clutter of porcelain and cashmere tapestries to meet the baron himself head-on at the door.

"I never expected you here," spits the Hon. Lord Gregory, surprised. "What do you want?"

"Nothing from you," says Nerys, shakily.

Lord Gregory ignores the impudence. And it might've been the sight of the woman before him, radiant, angry, swollen with love, that a measure of tenderness grows in him, even as he scowls.

"Why are you here then?"

Nerys draws a ragged piece of flannel from her apron. "Dusting, my lord. I'm done, if you're wanting the room to yourself," she mutters, turning to go, and reeling as a knife-edged hand retracts her like a whip. Another fishes under her pinafore to retrieve the vellum-jacketed book she carries there.

"Variations in the Hierarchic Division of Varunasi," reads the baron. "Professor Brunvald, no less! Your tastes are improving, Nerys."

"Let me go, sir."

"...But your manners are appalling," says Gregory, scrutinizing her for a moment before

release. "You know," he says, "—you might have asked to borrow it first." And he plants the volume squarely in her hand, crushing her face in the fierce application of his mouth until she draws blood from his lip. He roars, and she runs.

Nerys returns to her loft and crashes on the bunk, where she cries herself to sleep that night. A promise.



It was dark when the odd assortment of servicemen paused by the gates, sprang the padlock and proceeded up the drive. Two policemen conversing, and a wolf with a large array of weaponry on his belt; they dropped their lamps and clambered beneath the rope across the entrance-way.

"Not a good idea," Krychek muttered. "Notice his hardware? I wonder what he's got on him, besides..."

Basil glanced at the mercurial spheres, rods and gilded oilskin pouches dangling off the wolf's midriff, and wondered how they were applied.

"You said he was decent enough," he argued, *sotto-voce*. "And we need to make sense of this."

"Chasing ghosts..." said the kestrel.

Basil coughed.

"So, Mr. Greyfuss—you're familiar with Auric House?"

"I'm afraid not," said the wolf. "Never been here. His lordship always said to forget the place. Odd, though—I thought worse of it. The structure doesn't look unsalvageable, if you ask..."

Then he was silent. Only the gold-specked cornices glittered beyond their periphery of light. Directing the lamp floorwards caught the profile of Lord Gregory's splintered neck, etched beneath the stairs in chalk; they lingered over it.

"I know there's trouble with finance," Greyfuss volunteered, after a time. "Not my field, I only guard the estate. Some trouble with the armoury, but that's been going on since—"

"—Before your time?"

Greyfuss nodded.

Basil reserved comment for later. A fair amount of dirt had rubbed off the oakwood steps, he observed. Trace Forensics' handiwork—he peered up the darkness and gingerly made his way above. Only the silence remained in the monofocal shaft of his lamp; snowfall tapped the windows.

"Trace Forensics find anything?"

"Nothing to clash with the baron's report," said Krychek.

"Some of these are locked," Greyfuss called, trying the knobs on a row of cabinets. "I forgot to ask—what're we looking for?"

"Anything to suggest culpability," said Krychek.

"—Or the lack thereof," Basil called from above. He appeared on an aisle overlooking the central hall below, settling his lamp on the guard-rail to study the dust. "Lord Gregory must've lost his footing here."

"Trace Forensics would've noted that," said Krychek. "Don't know what else there is."

Basil was silent.

"Detective?"

A cry, and turning Krychek saw Basil plunge towards him, smashing and sending a cloud of dust into the shadows. Greyfuss leapt up the stairs, teeth bared and clenching on a lamp swinging wildly before him, shifting from room to room in quick successive intervals. He covered the floor in a minute and returned, alone and bewildered, to look on the kestrel glancing up from below.

✧
"...Just the collar-bone," said the medic, "—and we haven't a brace for that one."

Basil sat in the Council Infirmary, eyes dull and dark-rimmed. Krychek and Greyfuss stood gravely by.

"...And you haven't a clear recollection of things?"

"Someone was up there," said Basil.

"Someone assaulted you?"

"No." Basil chuckled foolishly. "I was startled, that's all. It's stupid, but I must've slipped."

"The guard-rail's above your waist," Krychek observed. "Quite a slip."

"What did you see?" said Greyfuss.

Basil shook his head. "Funny—I don't remember."

"You seem fine enough," the medic observed.

"Someone in loose dress..." said Basil. "Maybe a robe. I didn't catch the face, but it was odd..."

"Why?" said Krychek.

Basil was silent. Then he jerked up.

"No noise," he said. "From the floorboards."

Kestrel and wolf gave a look.

"Krychek raised the alarm," Greyfuss started. "The Council Infirmary sent a wagon, and a half-dozen officers, too."

"Auric House being a crime-scene," Krychek added helpfully.

"One of the officers was an Adept..."

"From the Society for Psychical Research. Our liaison."

"—And he scanned you. I don't know what it means," said the wolf, quietly, "—but he said you

were covered in *metaplasmic residue*. Didn't see it myself, though."

Basil stared. "Metaplasmic residue..."

"Covered in it," said Krychek, nodding. "Whoever it was startled you, Basil—he's not been alive for a while."

✧
He notices, first, that the house is empty of servants.

"Covered in it," said Krychek, nodding. "Whoever it was startled you, Basil—he's not been alive for a while."

Home from abroad, he enters and crosses the anteroom. Butlers, maids and valets have abandoned their customary posts—a quick survey of the house finds its desertion complete, until his steps carry him to the servants' hall atop the stairs. And there he finds them: two of his father's bailiffs, rough men in their soil-encrusted boots and overalls, standing immobile on the Morris carpet.

There is a soft, strangled cry from a nearby room.

He rushes towards it, anger and fear congealing in him, until the hefty forms of the watchmen arrest his movement. One is fearful, and concealing it—the other, gleefully seizing the chance to obstruct him, for he has always loathed young Master Will.

"You're not wanting to go there, sir," the bailiff pronounces. Blackened, oily teeth and the reek of horse manure blind him.

In sleep, the textures are faithfully drawn again.

He raises his riding-crop, and lets fall across the bailiff's face.

And then... he doesn't recall what happens. Only that a terrible scorching burns his cheek, and mouth, and midriff, and something awful has happened to his eye. The room no longer makes sense to him—when it grows familiar again, he exerts the one good eye at his command, and sees his father, the Hon. Lord Gregory.

Or so he seems. There is no recognition in the man's face, only a blankness—his hair is tousled, and his smart copper vest of virgin wool, rumpled. The Hon. Lord Gregory nods a command, and Master William finds himself in the kitchen, where a third bailiff washes his eye and mouth with a rough cut of flannel. The cold water comforts him, and he lets himself be comforted.

Thinks nothing.

✧
Come night, and Basil was back on the Parliament grounds, perusing a hefty stitch-bound journal of the old sort, in vellum; a latticed candle-lamp on a nearby post flickered above him.

Keeping indoors would have been cosier, but he'd wrecked his allowance enough as it were—dinner had cost a fortnight's rent the last time.

Krychek sauntered up at a quarter past ten. "Eaten?"

"Picked something up on the way," said Krychek. He eyed the journal. "Hope you didn't pinch that from the Archives...?"

"Imperial College library. Had to pull rank to retrieve it."

"They let you walk?"

"I can be persuasive," said Basil. "So. How was your day?"

"I'll be blunt," said the kestrel. "Greyfuss could be a problem."

Basil shook his head. "I thought he'd appreciate some progress."

Krychek snorted. "Lord William's retainers are taking it too damn personal. The fact is, Greyfuss thinks we've identified the culprit: a *spook*. And he can't see why his master's not been released yet."

Basil shut the journal.

"I thought so myself, for a bit," he said. "Only the SPR didn't find metaplasmic residue on Gregory, right? That means—"

"—The spook we encountered wasn't responsible for Gregory, I know," said the kestrel. He shrugged. "Well, there's something else you should know. We're off."

Basil blinked.

"Greyfuss raised a howl so's the Society for Psychical Research got involved. Their new defence for William is *diminished responsibility by possession*. Auric House is forbidden to non-Society personnel until they've proven it—or tried to."

"I don't know about that," said Basil, frowning. "Spooky goings-on doesn't feel right. We can leave that for the SPR, then, it's their job."

Krychek eyed the journal. "Ours being...?"

"Finding what's out there," said Basil. "This book's from Political History, cross-referencing entries on the Varunasin *tributum*. Took me a while to find it... very obscure."

"I don't follow," said Krychek.

"If there's an answer to William's case, it's in history," said Basil. "Specifically, the history of Auric House."

"And that book'll help?"

"The embassy never existed in records—not officially. Lord Gregory bought the manor and let it decay; there's a reason for it."

Krychek rubbed a wing on his face. "Go home, Basil. It's late."

"I have an appointment."

"Oh?"

"Mr. Gef."

"Aw, no!"

"Yes," Basil nodded.

"Damn it!—you say he's turning up tonight? Here?"

They proceeded through the entranceway. From the frontal dais the whole of the Parliament was visible: it was a time when service lulled with the general patronage. Business would fall till the night-folk of London grew in number, shifting the ambience. Down by the wainscots a number of braziers lit the steps to a considerable degree.

Krychek took off.

Sweeping the closest platforms by air took him half a minute—more for the private booths above. Basil called for the steward and, turning, caught sight of a nasty development down by the western door.

"Damn!"

A number of wolves were leaving—paddling the air between them, slung from a harness like venison primed for curing, was the slender, emaciated frame of Mr. Gef...

"Halt!"

Basil leapt at the patrons. Wending himself around them was a talent acquired through years of skimming the crowded Wicker markets. Nine-month Academy manoeuvres and a youth misspent tossing mud-pies certainly helped. He crossed the portal in seconds and stalled in the black, frosted gardens beyond.

It was a windless night, and moonless. Adjusting his eyes took long enough to determine where they'd headed. Basil began to run, trusting his luck—snow battered him softly as he determined, alarmingly, just where the wolves had gone. There was a tell-tale stamping now, behind the trellises... and Basil rounded the path to see a parti-coloured wolf-pack tearing off the Parliament grounds and onto the city streets. A frightened yowling trailed along with them.

Basil couldn't believe it.

He ignored the futility and started after them, pacing himself now, through the pillared gates. A whistle in his breast-pocket—he pursed and blew a series of trills, adding (as an afterthought) a call resembling—

A kestrel, crashing in frost.

"What the hell!—"

"Gef—he's been taken," said Basil. "Company of wolves—you know—I think they were Greyfuss's men!"

"Standard procedure," said Krychek, and he flew.

Basil nodded, caught his breath for a bit and proceeded down the avenue. Tracks were

disappearing fast in the snowfall, though a hound or weasel wouldn't have worried. He would sound the whistle every two streets and spread the word as he could; only an Avian or mounted guardsman could sort the matter now. Till then, Krychek was alone—assuming he managed to find them. Basil kept his pace, watching for the police and tracking as best he could the wolf-prints by lamplight filched from Broomgrove Avenue. He met a lone ferret guard and afterwards a sergeant off-call, headed for home—neither could help much, but the ferret's nose let them proceed after sound and track had vanished for Basil.

A good twenty minutes and finally—whistling from the park! Sgt. Boehmer knew a short-cut—ferret wanted keeping to the scent, predictably, but was out-ranked. Basil kept mum, grateful for any kind of lead. The sky was a sullen red—flakes large and heavy, almost audible—no wind, but flashes of silent lightning in the clouds. Seven minutes, and a dozy park-attendant in coat and pyjamas joined them. Seven more and the ferret caught wind of something... There, by the gazebo! A pack of wolves speckled with frost—Krychek minding the crumpled mound of Mr. Gef—and a quadruped with parti-coloured fur.

A large male wolf.

Basil slowed to a brisk walk.

"Greyfuss," he called, "—this fellow's wanted for questioning."

"I know."

"We've got procedures for the like..."

Greyfuss spat.

"Gef's got news and I mean to hear it," he said.

"You'll be the first, then. After we're done..."

A bark, and suddenly the wolves were shifting. Krychek spied a police-lamp in the trees, where a score of armoured shades detached themselves wielding a score of nightsticks. The Metropolitan patrol—Greyfuss left Basil to face them up front. And ran into—

A large black stallion, with a rider.

It seemed to Basil that the Hon. Lord William was old before his time. Certainly his eyes were flanked by creases, and his face, speckled with the blots of age. Vapours of thin, white hair enveloped him like an aureole—but in his manner of dismounting, Basil observed the shift and spring impossible for the aged. Something had consumed the baron's face to the world.

Lord William gripped the wolf's confounded paw and gave a firm, brief shake. Greyfuss said nothing.

"Trouble?" said an officer.

"None," said the baron. "Constable?"

"None," said Basil, panting and grasping his ribs. "Just got a witness required for questioning, is all."

A wheezing informed them Gef had quite recovered. There was a preternatural stillness when he and the baron caught the other's eye. Now in the midst of assembled retainers and police it seemed like a silence greater than ice had engulfed the square, the city, braving the gulf spanning a wretched, grinning mongoose and silent man over time and the slumberous folk of London to connect, perhaps, and remember. Lord William crossed the space between them; and the mongoose, flinching in time to some anticipated blow, barked at him and snickered. Snow flurried down the gazebo as Basil cogitated furiously. Death at the manor. Ghosts. The mongoose.

"Good," said the baron. "Good."

He turned and left the circle of wolves and patrolmen, passing softly away just as Basil finally understood.



One o'clock in the morning, and the Hon. Lord William climbed the steps of Auric House. It had proven, in the end, a question of *timing* rather than evidence—the baron could appreciate that. Time to pursue the matter was all he'd need, but time had the habit of running out on folk tonight. He clambered under the rope secured by Trace Forensics and proceeded down the hall.

Halfway up the steps and the ambience fell by degrees. Traces of mud on the landing crunched like ice. And the room?—third door on the left, he recalled, turning the knob to find it—

"Locked."

The baron lurched—a mass in the shadows behind him fingered a key.

"You'll be wanting this," said Basil. "Allow me." He prodded the lock and twisted—something gave and the crusty rosewood door swung away.

"Your hours are more extensive than I thought," said William.

"Likewise," said the constable. "Please." He signalled the baron to follow, raising the blinds on his lamp as he stepped within.

The room was unfurnished, and only the tattered yellow drapes clung on their rods now, billowing gently—slabs of cornice littered the floor, and above them the rafters grew stark and black in the lamplight. Basil nestled deeper into his coat. The air was cold beyond the simple frosty ambience by the windows.

"Well," he said. "I suppose we should start explaining ourselves. Never mind the lawyers."

The baron nodded. "You first," he said.

Basil coughed, slicked back his hair and focused on the lamps. "You know about the

resident phantom, I guess. There's metaplasmic residue enough to *prove* it's here—enough for the SPR. Greyfuss was right: you've got spooks, sir, and that's not the end of it. But that's not why the Varunasin ambassador left.

"I'm talking about the embassy, of course. The one they'd a mind to building twenty-three years ago—Disraeli, and the Varunasin court. But they abandoned it... The science-priests have a thing about phantoms, I hear: very bad luck, maybe it made them nervous. But any first-rate priest could've dispelled the symptoms...

"Bottom line is, I don't think the phantom's to blame for wrecking diplomacy."

Basil paused.

"I've taken the liberty of checking your files, sir. Your father was Disraeli's chief in the '70s. Diplomatic security."

William nodded. "That was a long while back," he said.

"And he bought the manor in '77. Meaning the Varunasin ambassador sold an imperial bequest," said Basil. "They never mentioned an embassy again, and Auric House was delivered to your father—like he'd a vested interest in keeping the place."

"Perhaps," said the baron. There was a strained patience on his mouth—he regarded the constable with deep, furrowed brows.

"I'd like to see her," said Basil.

William glanced unfathomably at him.

"She was your *father's* burden, sir, and his secret—not your own. I'd like to see her."

The baron shook his head. "She was mine before she ever was my father's, sir. I don't want you here."

Basil sighed. "It won't make a difference, now Greyfuss has the Society for Psychical Research involved. They'll be here tomorrow, with their chalk and charts and candles. And they'll *raise* her if they have to... I guess you know this by now."

The baron laid a hand on his belt. A cluster of pouches, and a pewter flask, counterpoised the four-foot scimitar on his hip.

"If I'm correct, those are the props for a Waruli-class *exorcism*," Basil observed. "Enough to wipe the evidence, of course."

"The what?"

"Your father damaged British-Varunasin diplomacy, and covered his back for twenty years afterwards," said Basil. "Only something wouldn't wash—an echo, maybe, or a *ghost*—resurfacing. I saw it myself, you know, and you saw it two nights ago—prompting you to play the proverbial gander, and throw the old man downstairs. So now," said Basil, "—we've got a motive. Lord

Gregory's death was unintentional, you said... Maybe it wasn't."

Something moved behind him. "You're not wanting to go there," it growled.

And from the darkness a massive, parti-coloured shadow crept towards them.

"No, Grey!" said the baron. "He's not alone."

Basil spoke quietly. "In this room, sir, I am. But I wouldn't be, if I didn't believe Mr. Gef's account of things." He coughed. "I would be grateful, sir, if you could tell me what happened to Nerys."

Lord William considered for a time before he spoke again.

"Nothing happened," he said. "That was the problem, constable. Nothing *could* happen." He paused to wipe his face with a large, spotted hand. "Are you familiar with the principle of *jus soli*, sir?"

Basil breathed sharply. "Ah," he said.

"I thought you might be," said the baron. "So was Nerys. I tell you, sir, that I would've done everything right by her. Except for one thing."

"A legal union," said Basil.

The baron laughed. "You might describe it that way, yes. But it meant a lot more to her, constable—I didn't realize it myself till Monday night." He coughed, painfully. Enfeebled by time and the nameless disease that afflicted him, he raised his eyes to look directly at Basil.

"People like you, constable, I don't understand. Our shores are open—our farms and cities are ready for you. You have the run of our churches and homes. *But you never, never, never, never stop wanting what you can't have.* Like Tennyson's Lady, you know. It's grasping, and it's ungrateful, and it's mercenary."

Basil stiffened. "I don't read poetry," he said.

William changed the subject.

"She wanted my son," he said quietly. "In law and in name. But when she found it was impossible... she felt that our world would never take her children. So she came here." The baron looked about him. "When the contractions began."

"*Jus soli*," said Basil. "Varunasin citizenship. For the child."

"It's yours if you're born in the embassy," William nodded. "But they died instead—Father made sure of it. Suffice to say Disraeli and the Varunasin court were mortified." He sighed. "You know, constable, contrary to my father's assurances—she never left the country."

Snow tapped the windows, and they felt it—a charge that lingered and forged, steadily, the faintest aroma of ozone. Something *peripheral* approached from the hall beyond.

"That's enough," said the baron. He moved to the windows.



...And later, when the blood-decked floor grew a crust in the nighttime cold, they wondered how a man may slash himself ear to ear and render, concurrently, a show of the humblest atonement in his eyes. Basil contemplated this.

"Damn," he said.



"Gone?"

"Gone," said Krychek. "I've got a country-wide APB in effect."

Basil nodded.

"You ask me, though—Greyfuss is halfway to the Continent by now. Coroner reported that Lord William's demise was *assisted suicide*, clean and simple. Maybe that's not a problem."

"Maybe not," said Basil. He scratched himself, thoughtfully.

"Something you want to add?"

"No."

It was time to pack, and Basil bustled round the barracks' slumber-hall sorting his linen, stopping to ponder his wallet of police-tools with no small regard and otherwise regretting the lost occasion for high-street perusal while he'd the chance. Debriefing had been scheduled prior to boarding-time, but he forgot.

Krychek appeared at noon.

"The SPR's been at the manor," he said. "If there was a spook, they say, it's been wiped."

"Moore accepts my report?"

"Until they get a better hypothesis he'll have to. Still, he wants you available for a follow-up, if necessary..."

Basil nodded.

"I see you're packing," Krychek observed.

"Sorting things," said Basil.

The kestrel pecked himself thoughtfully.

"Well," he said, "—I guess I should be flying..."

It was time to leave. Basil retrieved his ticket—the carriage, aisle and seat in a bold monotype script—and his name, fading in parts and patches at the base.

Krychek clicked. "Thank you for the input, detective. And hey—next time you're in the capital, look me up," he said, winking, and catching a pair of pinfeathers on the door, where he left them.

Basil saw him vanish over the roofs.

He could also see the avenues teeming with folk vending their goods, keeping body and soul together, drawing the sun and hurrying, the lot of them, down the span of ages through the endless cobbled streets of the city. Every one accountable. And for Detective Constable Basil Wong, turning

his back on the tableau, the end seemed a long way away and a billion tales from this one.





Onwards and Upwards

by Mike McGee

illustrated by Aura Moser

Michael McGee hails from Calgary, Alberta in the far away and mythical land of Canada. His interests include movies, comics and games, personal electronics and of course, writing. This is his third piece for Anthrolations, his previous two being *Before I Kill You*, *Mister Bond...* and *Werewolves Anonymous*.

Aura Moser holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the School of Visual Arts in New York, NY. She has worked on the production of *Courage The Cowardly Dog*, *Venture Brothers*, and *Global Thingies* on Sesame Street. More of her work can be seen online at her web site <http://www.geocities.com/auramoser>. This is her first appearance in Anthrolations.

*H*e tapped his fingers quietly on the chair, the soft rubber of the armrests muting the sound of his claws. He always tapped his fingers when he was nervous, and today was no exception.

It wasn't much of an office. The walls were done in that slightly muted beige that suggests bread with too much butter on it, homogenous and bland. It was a nice desk, though, solid oak. He wondered if it was real oak, or the synthetic stuff—no, probably just a good imitation, there was no way a place like this could afford a solid oak desk.

Still, a nice desk. He wished it was his.

It had been about five minutes or so. The knot that his stomach had twisted itself into the past few weeks was twisting even further, the tension in his gut winding all the way up to his chest. He hated this part, and he'd been through this part quite a bit over the last few weeks. You had just enough time to go over the things you'd done wrong—the joke you didn't tell perfectly, the statements you stuttered on. Paranoia, that was it. That and low self-esteem. People like him had a lot of both.

Finally, the door opened. The interviewer walked back in. "Hey, sorry we kept you waiting a while..."

"It's okay."

"All right, I've checked out your record. Now, I'm sorry, but you're not quite qualified for the supervisor position."

He exhaled silently. He'd known it to be true, but... he had to hope. "Where was I short?"

"Oh, well, you don't have any prior experience, for one thing, and according to the psych report that the work agency gave us, you don't have a very dominant personality, which is needed if you're going to be in charge of others..."

I have a wife and a kid, and just last week I had to explain to my son why it's bad to paint your room green without asking, so I've been in charge of others, he thought. And you know that crack about my personality is profiling...

He thought this. But he didn't have the nerve to say it.

"However, I do have some good news—we could start you off at the starting position right away. It doesn't pay as much and the hours vary quite a bit during the week, but you are perfectly qualified for it and it could lead to a supervisor position down the line..."

He froze.

Don't take it. You want to take it, but don't take it. Don't even say you'll consider it. You can't slide back into old habits. Onwards and upwards. Always onwards and upwards. Fight that gut and fight that instinct and tell him no deal, tell him that you aren't going to take this lying down, tell him...

"I'll think about it, sir. I'll call you back soon. I have a few other interviews to go to."

"Of course, Mister...?"

"Ryan Tabbi."

"Yes, Mister Tabbi, keep in touch."

Ryan nodded, and without a word, fighting his instincts all the way to the door, he left.



The bus stop was quiet, but as he'd exited the Glutt Datamining Company he watched his bus go sailing by. He sighed, knowing it would be a long wait for the next one. But having nowhere else to go, he sat down on the bench, and quietly watched the city go by.

Sometimes, when the wind picked up, you could still smell the dust—or at least he could. He hated it, because it was such a strong scent and yet... so bland. So flavorless. They'd done as good a job as they could, cleaning the city up after the war

several decades past, but even though the wounds were closed, you could still see the scars.

A child, about seven, waddled by, dragged by his wrist by a mother who looked distracted by competing commitments. The kid looked like he'd hit that stage of the day where all a kid wanted to do was just lie down, no matter where he was, or whether it was appropriate.

The child pointed at him. "Kitty!" he squealed. "Kitty man!"

His mother tossed a quick glance at Ryan, and then turned back to her child. "No, no, he's not a kitty. He's a felinoid. It's rude to point, honey, now come along."

The kid threw a few errant glances at Ryan as he was dragged away. Ryan sighed. It wasn't the first kid, and it probably wouldn't be the last. Felinoids weren't that common... their numbers were on the rise, but they still weren't that common as they were in the city when he was a kid.

He went back to staring at the city. Holographic billboards told him he could really use a drink. Data providers told him that they had broken the speed of light, but only regarding the bandwidth of their machines. Cars honked. People talked. The smell was still there. And so was the Glutt building.

The interview had been like all the others he'd attended ever since he'd lost his business a few months ago. He'd only attended a few at first, then as the savings began to run out he'd started attending a lot more. Always the same thing. *We don't have a job that will let you use all that experience you had running your shop, but if you want we can have you take this menial job that you'll never get out of..*

And each time, he had to fight the urge to say yes. The urge was strong these days, with the money beginning to run out, but it was always strong. It always had been.

His thoughts turned homewards. His son, right now, was probably struggling through the last leg of his school day, and he knew things had to be tough. There was only one other felinoid in the whole school and the two of them didn't always get along. And his wife, she was probably just now closing up the bank where she worked, and heading home. He wanted to give her good news when he got home. More than anything.

But that kind of luck, people like him didn't get.

He scanned the crowds, looking for a furry face... he couldn't spot any. Usually he could, but today... well, it was appropriate right now. Right now, he felt pretty alone.

If he hurried, he could get back into the building before his bus came. He could tell them that

yes, he'd take the job, and then he could get this weight off of his shoulders, and then go home, tell his wife that he'd gotten a job. And maybe down the line, he could work his way into that position, a bit at a time...

No!

No, he told himself. *No. You know what'll happen. You'll never be able to dig yourself back out of the hole if you fall back into it. You ran a business for four years in a crappy little strip mall in the middle of nowhere. You can do this. Just hold on.*

He breathed in and out, and instinctively, he patted the pocket of his suitjacket. The book was still there, thank God...

He pulled it out. It was dog-eared, wrinkled, and well-read. He'd bought it years ago, and had read it cover to cover more times than he remembered. He knew the part he needed to read, and he flipped to it without thinking about it. He ran his fingertips over the polymer paper-substitute, and read to himself:

It's no secret that felinoids born before the end of the second civil war have a difficult time asserting themselves. The old republic had created them as a slave race, genetically engineering them to be subservient to their human masters, docile and easily controlled. They were indoctrinated in this from an early age, set to work in humiliating and dangerous conditions that 'valuable human lives' couldn't be wasted on. This wasn't the sole reason for the outbreak of the civil war but it was a contributing factor.

Take pride in yourself. You are, by law, an equal citizen in the postwar climate, and you are entitled to every right and privilege that you were told was denied to you but not to your human masters. Fighting this indoctrination is difficult, but it is not impossible. Felinoids just like you have fought this and triumphed over it, and you can too. Just remember to always be moving onwards and upwards. Never slide back into old habits, for every inch of ground you gain is ground you didn't hold the day before. Through your strength, and the advice I've written in these pages as a guiding hand to my fellow felinoids, we will take our place at humanity's side and forge a better world than the one we were born into.

He closed the book, and sighed. The author's given name was lost forever to legend, but he was most popularly referred to as Rask. He'd given up on his old name, claiming that it was given to him by people who didn't consider him a person, and he would take no pride in it. He was smart despite a lack of education, and strong-willed despite genetic

engineering. An assassin's laser had taken him from the world early, but it was easy to kill a man, and much harder to kill his ideas.

He thought back to the time before the war. There wasn't much to recall—he was much younger then. He never remembered his birth parents, having been separated from them as soon as he was out of the womb. The felinoids were capable of breeding, since it was cheaper than growing them in tubes, and the important traits were easily passed on through heredity. He'd grown up in a... a nice place, he guessed.

The family had called him Tabbi, because hell—he sure *looked* like a tabby cat, yes? And they were nice enough to him. They didn't have him doing anything too dangerous, they didn't feed him garbage like some families did to their 'pets...' They were nice enough.

But even when he was in the room, they'd talk about him as if he wasn't there. And they never asked him to do anything—they commanded, and he obeyed. It was a benevolent slavery, but it was still slavery. There was never any question that they considered him just a pet. And he'd never really had a problem with it.

The family had been rich—and more than that, the family had influence, political and military favors to call in, which was a good thing when the war came. The old republic had been up to a lot more dirty business than just genetically engineering slave races, and eventually came a time when the people and their leaders no longer saw eye to eye.

The leaders had been complacent, thinking that a revolution would never happen, which turned out to be their biggest mistake. It had started with slogans on walls, then secret underground movements, and before you knew it the lines had been drawn, and brother fought brother.

He still remembered that day. The city had been relatively untouched by the fighting, but all things come to an end. He remembered rushing into the protective dome in the middle of the city with the rest of the family, along with all the other families of influence. They knew what was coming, and they were spared from the weapon.

It was referred to as a nanobomb, although it wasn't really a bomb. It was just a canister opened up in the middle of a crowded square, and it had started out as a few small blobs of silver goo. Tiny, molecular-sized robots made up the goo, programmed with a simple base set of instructions: create more robots out of ambient materials.

A few blobs became larger blobs, as they ate up all the ambient material—concrete, water, and anyone who couldn't run fast enough. A lot of people fled the city, but a lot more wound up trapped inside, broken down into base chemicals and added to the goo. It was what scientists in the earlier days called a 'grey goo syndrome'—robots seeking to replicate and in the process, overrunning everything on Earth.

The rebels who had used the nanobomb had foreseen this and programmed the glob to stop once it reached a certain level of mass, however it still spread farther than anticipated. Since the dome in the center was guarded against such an attack, any robot that tried to break down the dome's components was shut down and destroyed by a small energy field that ran through it.

So he'd lived. Not that he had wanted to, because as efficient as the closed environment had been, there was still a tiny amount of air coming in—filtered by the field, but still coming in.

And with it came the scent of death. No human could ever imagine this scent, disgusting and overpowering, and no felinoid in the city could possibly have stood up to it. They had all fallen sick, including him. He shivered at the memory—the scent was still there, even today, after decades of rebuilding, even though scientists were convinced that due to the total molecular breakdown of the unprotected parts of the city, there was no way the scent could ever have been there, or still be there today.

But he'd passed out just the same, scent or no scent. And when he'd woken up, he was in a hospital, tended by a doctor who looked haggard and tired but was trying his best to help him, along with the other felinoids who had survived.

He'd later learnt that the nanobomb was only part of the attack strategy—the rebels knew that the influential of the city would seek to shelter themselves, and took steps against it. The silvery goo, with a little reprogramming, reconfigured itself into more solid and permanent structures, and the people inside the dome soon found themselves facing a siege camp, when the rebels arrived to use the equipment.

This had been the first large-scale test of nanotechnology in open warfare, and the rebels had seized the initiative with it. The old republic was broken, and in a coup d'etat later the rebels seized power. There was more to be done—the republic went down swinging—but the largest hurdle had been cleared.

It was a benevolent slavery, but it was still slavery. There was never any question that they considered him just a pet.

However, that hadn't meant much to him and his kind. They had been designed, and indoctrinated, to be subservient to humankind. How could you free a race that didn't want its freedom? How could you break the chains of slavery when they were chains of DNA?

Solutions ranged from keeping them around, which was struck down because the new order didn't believe in slavery, to killing them, which was considered un-humanitarian. Strict protocols had been forged between this new order and the rest of the countries of the world regarding the science of nanotechnology, so 'reprogramming' the felinoids through nanotech was out of the question. Eventually, an imperfect solution arose—engineer it so that the next generation of felinoids didn't have this trait within them, and eventually the problem would solve itself.

It was agreed to be the best way. But it didn't do him a lot of good. It did his son a lot of good—his son would never know the horrible urges, the desire to just bow your head and say "Yes, master." But it did him no good at all. Him, and others like him, were already referred to as the lost generation, and it was true. Their history was shameful and their future was in doubt, and their present was a constant struggle against society—which still harbored its biases—and against themselves.

Did they foresee this when they made their first forays into genetic engineering, he wondered? Did they ever stop to think about the fact that society changed a lot faster than biology did?

That what they were building today might not be desired tomorrow?

Obviously not.

So here he was. Married to a woman he'd met at an 'assertiveness training seminar,' with a son going through school. A failed bookstore business and a string of bounced job applications. He hoped that the person who invented the felinoid baseline code was still alive, because he wouldn't be alive for long once Ryan got his hands on him.

Ryan. It wasn't even his real name. Tabbi was his real name. Ryan was just the name he picked once he realized he needed a first name...

The bus pulled up with a hiss of hydraulics, startling Ryan out of his daze. He fumbled for his pass as he got on board, and then he sat down on one of the front seats. He stared out the window, daydreaming.

The book had helped him, it had helped them all, but it was just print. It could only go so far. Felinoids couldn't change their stripes. They could dye them a different color but underneath, the stripes would still be the same. Rask fought against that, and all it had earned him was an assassin's laser through his skull. Eventually Ryan would pass from the earth like all living things, and the world would breathe easier once his struggles had been weeded out...

Shockingly, and shamefully, he found himself jealous of his son. Of the opportunities he'd have that Ryan never would. He clamped down on that thought, reminding himself that his son had his own troubles, and he thought back to happier



times, when the bookstore's profit margin was rising, and when things looked like they would work out...

"Yo, get outta my seat, Mr. Pussy."

Ryan looked up. The man who'd spoken was young, but looked at him with familiar eyes, the eyes that said *I am your master and you are my pet*. There were still people who brought their children up in the older ways, and of course there were people who came to racism all on their own...

"You deaf, you pussy? Get outta my seat! Get to the back of the bus where you belong!"

Almost without thinking, Ryan stood to vacate his seat...

No.

No!

"No," he said simply.

"Oh, what? What? I beg your fuckin' pardon? You get the fuck outta that seat, before I tell your master you been a bad pet—"

"Shut up." Ryan's gaze narrowed. "I was here first, I chose this seat, and if you have a problem with that you can go hop on another bus."

"I got a problem with that, all right..." The man returned the gaze. He was young, and his body language spoke of anger bred into his bones. The bus had fallen silent. The driver was watching them, and any moment now he'd pull over, and solve this for Ryan... all he had to do was wait—

NO!

"Listen, asshole," growled Ryan, anger flaring through him. "I. Was here. First. The fact you can't comprehend that is none of my fucking concern. *You* go sit at the back of the bus. I am not giving up my seat to a racist wad of shit like you." Ryan held his gaze, and held his anger, and pushed his instincts away.

The staring contest continued. Then the man abruptly turned and walked towards the back of the bus.

He didn't get too far before the bus stopped, and the driver called out to him. "Buddy. Get the hell off of this bus."

"What? Fuck you—"

"Off! Now. And the next bus you get on, you act civil to the people there with you, no matter where they're sitting or what they look like. Now get off." The rear door hissed open.

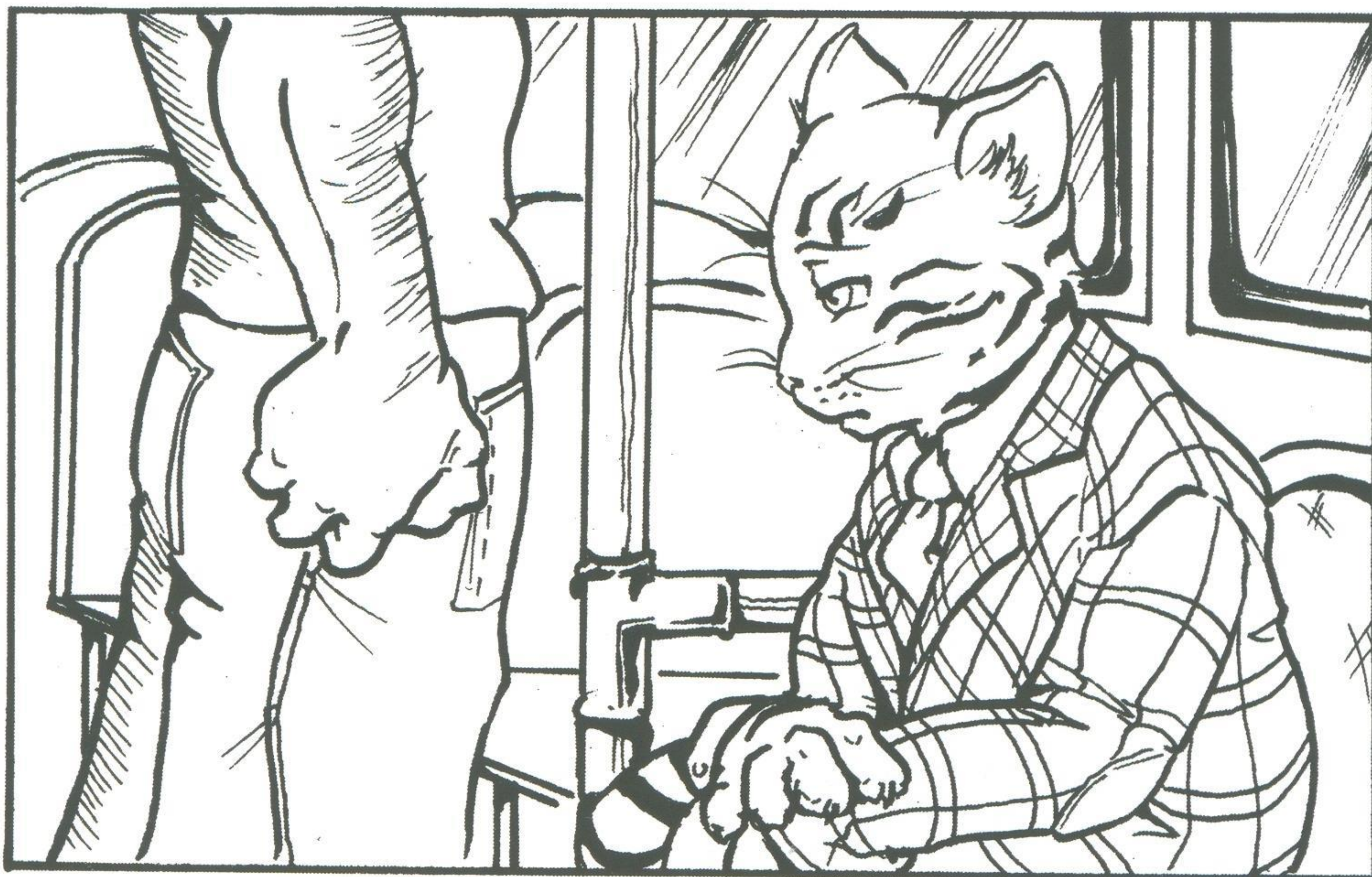
Muttering to himself, he exited. The doors shut, and the bus rolled on. The driver shook his head. "Sorry about that, buddy. I know you don't need shit like that."

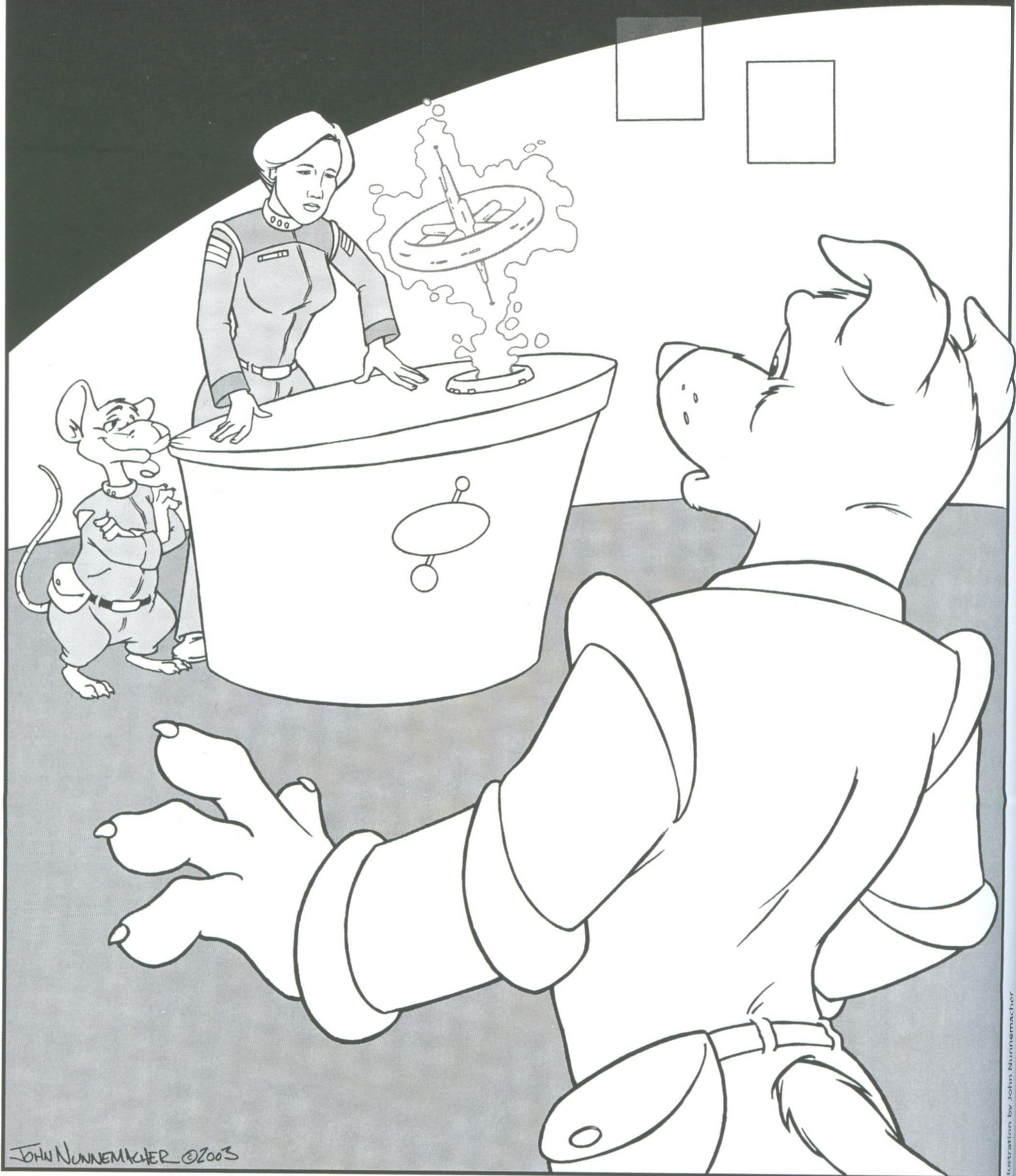
Ryan nodded. "It's okay." Satisfied, the driver turned his attention back to the road, and Ryan turned his attention back to the window.

He was shaking. Nerves twitched throughout his body, and his stomach was in a knot. And he hadn't been happier in weeks. He'd stood up for himself, he'd stared him straight in the eye, and he hadn't backed down despite all his instincts telling him to. He'd won. It was a small victory, but every inch of ground gained was an inch you didn't have yesterday.

He tapped the book in his pocket, and smiled quietly to himself. It wasn't a job, and it didn't put money into his bank account, but realistically they could go for a while longer on their savings, and there were always help groups. Maybe he could even get a job with them, or have them help him search for one. There was no need for him to shoulder this burden by himself.

The streets outside the window streamed past, and Ryan Tabbi no longer felt alone.





JOHN NUNNEMACHER ©2003

Fish Gotta Swim

by Michael H. Payne

illustrated by John Nunnemacher

Michael's stories have appeared in places like *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, the *Writers of the Future* anthology, and previous issues of *Anthrolations*. His first—and so far only—novel, *The Blood Jaguar*, is still available from Tor Books, and his comic strip *Terebinth* can be found on-line at <http://pandora.xepher.net/terebinth> and in issues of *Yarf!*

John Nunnemacher graduated with honors from the Graphic Arts program at Moravian College in Pennsylvania. Since then, he has worked a long string of diverse jobs, including serving as Production Manager for a monthly business journal, drawing caricatures in the Florida heat and humidity at SeaWorld, and creating animation and character layouts for projects such as *Dilbert: The Animated Series*, and Disney's *The Tigger Movie*.

“*T*amerlane!” Roaring from the com and echoing off the ship-ceramic of the duct, Mr. Russell's voice almost knocked the wrench from Tamerlane's paw. “Whatever you're doing, stop it and get down here!”

Tamping the bolts quickly—just till he could get back—Tamerlane snapped the wrench to his belt, turned off the magnetics of his harness, shoved himself toward what little ‘down’ existed this close to the ship's rotational center, and tapped his com unit. “Yes, sir!”

The pull got stronger, his fall speeding up, and Tamerlane focused forward, counted the transfer doors till he was approaching the crossing ducts of the half gee ring. At any other time, he would've taken the transfer slowly, but with Mr. Russell booming “*Now, Tamerlane!*” from his belt...

He flipped on his harness, the magnetics slamming him into the wall, flailed his paws to hit the buttons for both pairs of transfer doors, then switched the harness off, the pressure differential sucking him through the widening crack into the crossing ductwork. The half gee pulled him toward the floor, but he clawed the closing sequence into the panel as he fell past it, heard the servos grind, the doors reversing their direction; then the floor was under him, rolling till he fetched up against the first turn in the ductwork.

Pushing himself to his paws, he bounded away on all fours, slid down the incline—“I don't see you here, Tamerlane!”—punched the touch pad at the third grid, scurried through, flung up the last grill, and dropped onto the spongy carpet of Maintenance Section's front office.

Mavis sat typing at her terminal, her whole body shaking, eyes wide in her chihuahua face. “Please go in, Tam,” she whimpered. “He's been yelling ever since—”

“Damn it, Tamerlane!” Mr. Russell's shout from the wall speaker made Mavis's ears fold flat. “Get your mangy hide in here before I lose my temper!”

Through the inner office door Tamerlane scrambled and snapped out a salute. “Reporting as ordered, sir!”

Behind his desk, Mr. Russell sprang up, only his magnetic shoes keeping him on the floor, his thin face bright red. “When I tell you to be here, dachshund, I want you here!”

“Yes, sir!” Tamerlane held the salute until Mr. Russell returned it.

A laugh and scent to his right—Tamerlane almost turned, but Mr. Russell hadn't told him to stand down yet—became a female voice and the tangy stink of rat. “Ah, doggies. Can't imagine you humans running this ship without ‘em.”

Mr. Russell lowered himself into his chair. “And you can shut your trap, sergeant.”

“Excuse me?” the rat voice asked. “You think a janitor like you can give orders to Security personnel, Russell?”

Tamerlane gasped, drawing Mr. Russell's attention. “For God's sake, Tamerlane! At ease! We've got a crisis here!”

“Sir.” Tamerlane relaxed and glanced at the rat leaning against the wall, her arms folded over a dark blue Security jumpsuit. A grin pulled at her whiskers, and she winked.

Tamerlane snapped his eyes back to Mr. Russell, to the sour look on his face. “Tamerlane, this is Sergeant Pit from ship's Security. It seems they need a—”

“Shut up, Russell.” The rat crossed the room with a grace that surprised Tamerlane: he'd always thought Security spent most of their time in the one gee of the ship's outer ring. “Info here's on a need-to-know basis.” She jerked a thumb at Tamerlane. “I say what your puppy hears, got it?”

Tamerlane braced himself, but Mr. Russell just glared. The rat went on: "You got a problem with that, you can direct your complaints to Lt. Justine Cheever."

A vein throbbed in Mr. Russell's forehead. "Oh, I will, sergeant. You can count on that." He poked his desk, and the door slid open. "Now, I've got you my best duct crawler, so maybe you throps could get the hell out of my office?"

"A pleasure." She gave a sloppy salute, insolence thick in her scent, in her eyes, in the set of her whiskers, and turned to Tamerlane. "C'mon, ductdog: that's a good boy."

Tamerlane wavered, looked from the rat to Mr. Russell. "Sir? What...what are my orders?"

Mr. Russell pounded his desk. "Get out! Now!"

Snapping his salute, Tamerlane pivoted and marched into the front office, the rat laughing behind him. "I do so love to watch an enlightened manager at work."

"Damn the whole—!" Mr. Russell shouted, but then the door whooshed shut, cutting him off. Tamerlane turned to glare at Sergeant Pit, but she was already moving past him.

"Bring your equipment, ductdog," she said, hitting the panel on the front office door and looking back over her shoulder. "We got no time to waste." The door ground open, and she hop-stepped out into the corridor.

Hackles going up, Tamerlane hurried after her. "I can't imagine your lieutenant will enjoy hearing about your insubordination, sergeant."

She snorted and took the next right, heading for the tube drop, Tamerlane realized. "Lt. Cheever's got more to worry about right now than some janitor's hurt feelings."

Her tone set Tamerlane's hackles rising even further. "Mr. Russell is my commanding officer, and—"

"A job he loves, I can tell." The corridor widened into the drop station. Pit pressed her thumb to the pad and gestured for Tamerlane to precede her as the gate went up. "I'll bet ship's council put his office up here so they wouldn't hafta deal with him down in the habitats." She shook her head and stepped onto the tube platform.

Tamerlane stared at her, the tube before them darkening, the door sliding open to reveal the drop car inside. "How... how can you... how can you say...?" Sputtering, he moved into the car, buckled himself to a seat.

She grinned. "First thing they teach us in Security is to call 'em as we see 'em." She poked the 'outer ring' button in the car's panel, sat, and strapped in opposite him. "Or don't you think humans can be jerks?"

"It's not my place to—" The door slid shut, the warning buzzer went off, and Tamerlane swallowed against the sensation of accelerating down into increasing gravity. "To make judgments about my superiors," he finished.

Pit rolled her eyes. "Fish gotta swim," she muttered.

Tamerlane blinked at her. "What?"

"Fish gotta swim." She settled back with a wave of her paw. "And even after all the noodling the humans've done to our DNAs, you doggies still gotta be loyal to a fault."

"I see." It took some effort not to bare his teeth. "And you rats have got to be insufferable?"

She grinned. "We're all true to our natures."

Turning away, her rat scent itching his nose, the gravity making him feel bloated—he hadn't been to the outer ring in more than a month—Tamerlane looked everywhere but at her till the chime sounded. The swirling accelerations slowed through his inner ear, and the car jerked to a halt, one solid gee pulling him into his seat. Pit got to her paws across the car and grinned again. "Too heavy, pup?"

Tamerlane scowled, undid the belt, and stood. "I have traveled," he began, "through the ductwork at every level of this ship, and I have never—"

"Yeah, I know." The car door had opened, Pit padding toward it. "That's why I came looking for you."

She left the car and Tamerlane followed, forcing his legs to adjust. Only a few humans moved through the drop station, the lights dimmed to night mode. Pit led him through the station and out into one of the ship's Plazas, the pattern of ducts and glowrods in the ceiling telling him they were in Port Arthur Township near the ship's Admin offices.

Pit led him across the Plaza—odd, seeing it from ground level—to Security, the only building still the gray-white of ship-ceramic. She skirted the main entrance, though, headed down an alley to a side door, jabbed her thumb at its plate, and waved Tamerlane in.

Gray-white doors set in gray-white walls lay beyond. Pit padded past Tamerlane, tapped one of the doors, and stepped through when it opened. "I got him, boss."

"Good work, sergeant," came a soft voice, and Tamerlane followed Pit in to see a solidly built human female standing before a desktop holo-screen, the familiar wheel-shape of the ship spinning above it. "Come in, both of you."

The bars on her uniform made Tamerlane stiffen to attention. "Ma'am!" he barked.

"Sheesh," he heard Pit say. "This guy's got it bad."

The human smiled. "I find it rather refreshing."

"Uhh, rats don't do that 'bow wow' stuff, boss..."

A laugh, and the human said, "At ease, Tamerlane. I'm Lt. Cheever, and, well, ship's Security needs your help."

Tamerlane swallowed. "Yes, ma'am."

Pit had already moved to where Lt. Cheever stood by the holoscreen, and Tamerlane joined them. Lt. Cheever went on: "If I know Pit, she didn't tell you a thing, so let me fill you in. Last night, Engineering reported 667 grams of plutonium missing from the engines at the ship's hub."

"Plutonium?" Tamerlane's ears drooped. "But...but how?"

"An inside job." Lt. Cheever looked grim in the screen's green light. "And half an hour ago, we got a message with its source codes erased telling us a nuclear device was hidden somewhere in the ship. No demands: just that it was there and that we had six hours to find it."

Tamerlane could only blink for a moment. "But why?" he finally got out. "Why would anyone—?"

"Fish gotta swim." Pit leaned back against the wall, her arms crossed. "Cooped-up humans start coming unglued, and it's almost ten years we've been on this ship."

"Ah, yes." Lt. Cheever smiled. "Sgt. Pit's famous for her socio-psychological insights." She shook her head. "But we need you, Tamerlane, to lead Pit through the ductwork."

The air seemed to get warmer around Tamerlane. "Of course, ma'am. But how will we find—"

"Simple." Pit stepped forward, poked the holoscreen control, and a cross-section froze. "You take me to key points in the ductwork, and I scan for unusual radiation sources."

Lt. Cheever was shaking her head. "Unless the bomb's sitting next to any regular radiation source on the ship." On the schematic, she traced a ventilation shaft. "Take a sonic probe and sound the pipes: the bomb won't be ship-ceramic, so it should stand out quite clearly." She turned and saluted, Tamerlane automatically returning it. "Good luck."

"Right." Pit nodded. "We'll hit the equipment locker, then head out."

"But—" Tamerlane didn't have time for more than that before Pit had grabbed his arm and dragged him from the room. He saw Lt. Cheever poke the holoscreen, the schematic starting to rotate again, then the door was sliding shut, the gray-white hallway around him.

Tamerlane wrenched himself from Pit's claws, but she'd already let go, was stepping into another doorway. "But wait!" He followed her in. "None of this makes any sense!"

Shelves filled the room, Pit taking equipment packs from one. "Senseless and violent," she said. "That's humans. I'm surprised you don't know that, working for Russell." She grinned and held a pack out to him. "Put this on."

Tamerlane snatched it. "Mr. Russell is a professional, so he just gets upset when things go wrong! That's all!"

"Uh-huh." She shrugged on her own pack. "He's also the guy all our evidence points to for this, you oughtta know."

"What?" Tamerlane's stomach twisted. "You can't... you can't think Mr. Russell would—"

"We can." She padded past him into the hallway. "And we do. Lieutenant's put together a file this thick on him."

A moment of blinking, then Tamerlane hurried after her. "But... but... I mean, how could Mr. Russell get 667 grams of plutonium? And why? That isn't enough to—"

"Isn't enough?" Pit tapped the pressure plate of another door. "Are we or are we not talking about plutonium here?"

"Yes, but—"

"No buts." The door slid open, and she started in.

Tamerlane ran, grabbed her arm, spun her around. "But it's not enough to make a bomb!"

"Uh-huh." She clicked her tongue against her teeth. "Maybe you know all there is to know about pipes, but when it comes to bombs, I'll trust Cheever: tech's her specialty." The contempt that came into her black, unblinking eyes then made him swallow, let her go, look away. "And your loyalty should be to the ship, doggie, not to any one person on board. Especially not a scumbag like Russell."

A light popped on, and Tamerlane looked back to see her step into the Maintenance station under the Security building. "Now, let's find this thing and get done with it."

He nodded, his ears numb. It couldn't be... but a security officer wouldn't make a sabotage charge without evidence. A 'need-to-know' basis, Pit had said earlier. Obviously there was more here than Lt. Cheever had told him.

Which made sense: he was Maintenance, not Security. So he kept his mouth closed, nodded again, fastened on the pack she'd given him, and moved into the station, determined to keep his

"Last night, Engineering reported 667 grams of plutonium missing from the engines at the ship's hub."

mind on business. He tapped his code into the grid on the back wall, stepped into the crossing ductwork, his flashlight out, and let Pit come past before he tapped the grid closed. "Now, we're sounding for steel, right?"

"Or whatever." Snapping on a headset, Pit pulled a sonic probe from her pack and pressed it to the side of the duct, the high-pitched buzz tickling Tamerlane's ears. "Any clang that isn't ship-ceramic and shouldn't be there, we investigate." Tamerlane watched her turn one of the probe's glowing dials. "Well, this pipe sounds clean." She looked up at him. "Where to now?"

A quick sniff to get his bearings, and Tamerlane gestured down the ductwork to the left. "We can start on the water lines, though I don't know if a bomber would—"

"Just go." Pit clicked the probe onto her pack. "You're not here for your opinions on bombs and bombers, remember?"

Anger tightened his throat, but Tamerlane swallowed it. She was right: he had a very specific job to do. Nodding, he stepped past her and started into the ducts.

They circled the outer ring, his ears twitching every time her sonic probe made the walls buzz, until Pit finally poked her wrist com. "Outer ring clear, boss."

"Very well," came the lieutenant's voice. "Start up the other rings. We've got three hours still, so be careful."

"No duh." She flicked her com off and grinned at Tamerlane. "Get my mag harness outta your pack, will you?"

Tamerlane nodded, rummaged aside a stress gauge, a Geiger counter, and a first aid kit till he found a mag harness. She took it with a grimace. "I haven't used one of these since basic training." A few snaps, and she had it buckled on. "OK, where's the nearest shaft?"

He led her to main ventilation's F shaft, his codes opening the transfer doors. He stepped into the airlock, tapped the pressure gauge, and looked back at the rat. "Turn on your magnetics, sergeant. The differential's not bad right now, but better safe than sorry."

"Your motto, right?" She came up beside him and leaned against the wall. "And call me Pit. It's less syllables."

Tamerlane shrugged, turned on his own harness, poked the outer door sequence, and started yawning to pop his ears, cold wind plucking at his fur as the doors cracked into darkness. He heard Pit whistle. "Frosty," she said.

He nodded. "Well, a sonic pulse carries better through cold ceramic than warm, so I figured we'd start here."

She gave a laugh. "Always thinking, aren't you?"

The servos ground to a halt, and Tamerlane gestured to the door. "The up rail's just to the right."

"Gotcha." Pit slid over to the side of the lock, turned her flash to maximum, reached out into the shaft, and pulled herself from sight. Tamerlane followed, his fur prickling as it always did this far out in the ship's arms, 'down' such a substantial direction here.

In the beam of his light, he saw Pit waiting at the rail; a quick check of his harness, and he rolled out along the wall, the doors humming closed behind him. He attached himself just below Pit, found the toggle, and said, "Stand by."

"Do it," he heard. He poked the toggle, felt the rail clamp on, and they started moving up the side of the duct. "Just above the five-sixths ring," Pit was saying. "That'll carry the clang all the way up to the hub."

Tamerlane nodded, and they slid on in silence, the only sound the whoosh of the air circulating past them. The transfer doors for the five-sixths ring went by, and Tamerlane hit the toggle, disengaging them from the up belt.

The rail clicked to a stop, and he heard Pit above him muscling around with her pack. Then the sonic probe rang in his ears, the ductwork vibrating against his back, and... "Hold on," she muttered.

He looked up at her. "What?"

She had one paw on her headset, the other pressing the probe to the wall. The wall quivered again, her whiskers twitched, and she glanced up, the beam of her light vanishing into the darkness above. "Something at the top, sounds like."

"Stand by." Tamerlane engaged the clamp, the jerk as the rail took off making his heart lurch. It just didn't make sense, any of it, but he kept that thought to himself as the transfer doors to the four-sixths ring, the half-gee, the two-sixths, and the one-sixth rings slid past into the darkness below, the pull of 'down' lessening, the air getting colder.

"Disengaging," he said once they'd passed the one-sixth doors. "The maintenance hatches are just above us."

"Got it." Pit rolled from the rail out onto the curve of the duct wall. "I'm gonna do another sounding."

Tamerlane nodded, undid himself from the rail, and tried to control his panting, clouds of breath gusting from his mouth. The hum shook him, and Pit gasped. "Damn! The thing's fifteen, maybe twenty meters right through here! Gotta be planted right against the engine wall!"

"Here?" Tamerlane found the hatch with his light, rolled up to it, and tapped in his code. "But why would—?"

"Move!" Pit had followed him, was shoving herself into the hatch as it slid open, her paws flashing over the rungs into the tunnel beyond. "Stay here: I've got a shield suit on. Don't wanna take any chances with radiation..."

Radiation? Grabbing his pack, Tamerlane rummaged out the Geiger counter he'd seen earlier, flicked it on.

A few scattered clicks. Background. Nothing more.

He swallowed. "Pit?" he called.

"Not now!" Her light jiggled about fifteen meters down the tunnel. "I've found it! I'll hafta—"

"Pit, this counter says there *is* no radiation."

"What?" Her light froze. "This thing's got two-thirds a kilo of plutonium in it!"

"It can't!" He flicked off his magnetics, grabbed the rungs, pulled himself in. "And anyway, that's less than a critical mass!" He reached her then, saw an oblong metal casing attached to the wall between the rungs. "And what damage could it do here? These walls have to stand up to the engines firing! That's a lot hotter than any little plutonium bomb! I told you: none of this makes sense!"

Pit didn't say anything, just reached over, took the counter from him, and passed it over the casing. Tamerlane went on. "Mr. Russell would know this! Anyone in Maintenance would! So how could he possibly be the one who—?"

"Shut up." Pit let the counter float loose, pulled some tools from her belt, and started work on the casing. "But you're right." The metal popped off: Tamerlane caught it, tucked it and the counter into his pack, and looked back to see three strips of explosive putty surrounded by wires, a digital readout counting down from 14 to 13 to 12 to 11....

"This's just a putty bomb with a motion detector." Pit poked her tools at the wires till the readout froze at 4. "If it'd gone off, the only things hurt would've been you and me." She started pulling the putty from its setting and tucking it into little foil sacks she was taking from her pack.

Tamerlane watched, his mind spinning. "But...but why?"

"Fish gotta swim," Pit said through clenched teeth, the last sack disappearing into her pack. "We're the only ones who could've found the real device, so we had to be taken care of." She slammed her fist into the wall, the reaction flinging her back the other way, her pack crunching against the handholds. "Damn, damn, damn!"

Then she was turning, rubbing her paw, her teeth still clenched. "OK, you say two-thirds of a

kilo's not enough to build a bomb. So what *can* you do with it to hurt folks?"

"What?" Tamerlane blinked at her. "I... I don't —"

"Damn it, Tamerlane!" Pit sprang up and grabbed his arms, her momentum setting them drifting back toward the hatch. "We might only have minutes here! Think!"

"I don't know!" Tamerlane tried to wriggle free, but her claws poked through his uniform and into his fur. "I mean, with that much powdered plutonium, you could, I don't know, contaminate enough of the ventilation system to make Port Arthur's air radioactive, but—"

"Let's go." She shoved with her feet, her face hard, and Tamerlane watched the hatch opening sail past as they whooshed out into the air shaft. At the far wall, Pit activated her harness and shifted around, her magnetics sticking her in place with a thud. "Get us down, fast as you can."

A quick look showed him the rail just off to his right. He turned on his magnetics, rolled away when Pit let him go, reached the rail just as she did, and attached himself to it, his paw tapping in the override command. "But... the security codes on the air scrubbers would have to be—"

"Move!" she shouted above him, then the warning beeper went off, Tamerlane felt the clamp moving, and the sudden rush downward tore the air from his lungs. He hated riding an emergency rail, could barely keep his eyes open to count the transfer doors: one-sixth, two-sixths, half-gee, four-sixths, five-sixths....

He'd kept his paw on the toggle, managed to flick it as the five-sixths doors rocketed past, the belt jolting to a stop in the near one-gee, black spots bursting over his eyes.

But Pit was already beside him, grabbing and shaking him: "Where? Where do we go, Tamerlane?"

Tamerlane tried to swallow the burning in his throat. "Vent control," he got out.

Her paws wrenched him from the rail. "Which way?"

"The hatch..." Rolling from her grip, he let his light play down the side of the shaft till he found the ventilation crawlway just above the transfer doors to the outer ring. A quick slide down, and he tapped his code into the touchpad.

The door popped open, and something behind him started clicking: the Geiger counter, he realized, when Pit shoved him back against the cold of the ceramic and the clicking stopped.

"Stay here," she said, and she climbed into the hatch.

Enough time went by for Tamerlane to get his breath back before Pit emerged, her face grim.

“Powdered plutonium.” She patted her pack. “The whole 667 to the milligram.” Eyes hard, she looked over at him. “Get me back to the Security building in Port Arthur, will you, Tamerlane?”

He swallowed. “You’re going to arrest Mr. Russell now?”

Her jaw clenched. “No. He didn’t do this.”

Tamerlane couldn’t believe his ears. “Then... then everything’s OK?”

Pit spat out a laugh. “No. Let’s just go, huh?”

The expression on her face—anger, fear, pain—Tamerlane couldn’t tell what it was. “OK. Sure.” He shook himself and slid down to the outer ring transfer doors.

Pit didn’t speak the whole trip back, and Tamerlane had to bite his tongue to keep from asking what was wrong. Sure, she’d been mistaken about Mr. Russell, but Tamerlane hadn’t thought she’d be the sort to brood on it.

Through the ductwork he led her to the grid into the Security building’s maintenance room. Tamerlane tapped it open, and Pit pushed past him to stalk toward the door. Tamerlane shut the grid and ventured to comment, “Well, at least Lt. Cheever will be happy to know the ship’s out of danger.”

Pit stopped at the doorway. “Yeah,” she said, her voice cracking. “She’ll be overjoyed.”

Tamerlane blinked, moved to her side, reached for her shoulder. “Pit, are you all right?”

She just pulled away, pressed a red button on her wrist com, and moved down the hall to Lt. Cheever’s door. There she stopped, sighed, worked the touch pad, and stepped inside.

Still confused, Tamerlane trailed after, entering the office to see Pit leveling her stungun at Lt. Cheever seated behind her desk. “Please don’t move, ma’am,” she said.

Lt. Cheever rose slowly, her hands resting on the desk top, her face ashen. “You’re making a mistake, Pit.”

“I don’t think so.” Pit’s gun stayed trained on the lieutenant’s chest. “You knew a sonic probe’d lead us right to the bomb you’d planted up by the engine. All the tips linking this to Russell, the threat we got, every bit of info we had, you found it.”

She licked her lips. “Sounds a little flimsy to me.”

“We’ll let Major Ghalil decide that.”

Neither of them moved, Tamerlane blinking from one to the other, then rapid footsteps echoed in the hall outside, human scents hitting his nose as figures burst in at the corner of his vision and

stopped short. “Pit?” an older male voice asked. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“Sir, please place Lt. Cheever under arrest.” Pit’s eyes and aim held steady. “The charges are terrorist acts against the ship, the plutonium theft yesterday, and placing two potentially lethal objects within the ship’s structure.” Only then did she lower her gun, her shoulders tightly bunched under her jumpsuit. “I have evidence here to—”

“Evidence.” Lt. Cheever’s upper lip twitched. “Sir, I don’t know what this rat thinks she’s—”

“Lt. Cheever.” A human stepped forward, major’s bars on his uniform. “You’re under arrest. You’ll be held in detention until 0600 hours when a tribunal will be convened.”

The lieutenant’s eyebrows shot up, and two humans moved to her side, Pit lowering her head. “Sergeant Pit,” the major went on, “your report will be on my desk by 0500. And if it’s not damn convincing, *you’ll* be in front of that tribunal at 0600. Clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Pit didn’t look up, and Lt. Cheever didn’t look down, the guards leading her from the room. The humans all moved from Tamerlane’s sight, and the door slid shut.

For another moment, Tamerlane could only stare at Pit. “But,” he finally got out, “but why? Why would—?”

“I don’t know!” She whirled, fists clenched, black eyes wavering. “I don’t fucking know!” She took a breath, blew it out. “But Cheever’s the only one who coulda put it together.” She focused on Tamerlane. “I’ll need you to come back at 0600 to testify, Tamerlane. If you wouldn’t mind, I mean...”

“Come back?” Tamerlane stepped forward. “I’ll stay. Someone has to get you coffee while you write that report.”

Her brow wrinkled. “Russell’ll tear your ears off. Doesn’t he expect you back?”

He shrugged. “My last orders were to get out.”

A smile touched her whiskers. “Well, well. Don’t tell me our doggie’s loyalty is wavering?”

“Not at all.” He reached out and touched her shoulder. “Fish have to swim, after all.”

“It’s ‘gotta.’” Pit blinked, and Tamerlane heard what sounded like a sniff, though it quickly became her clearing her throat. “Yeah, OK, whatever. Commissary’s upstairs.”

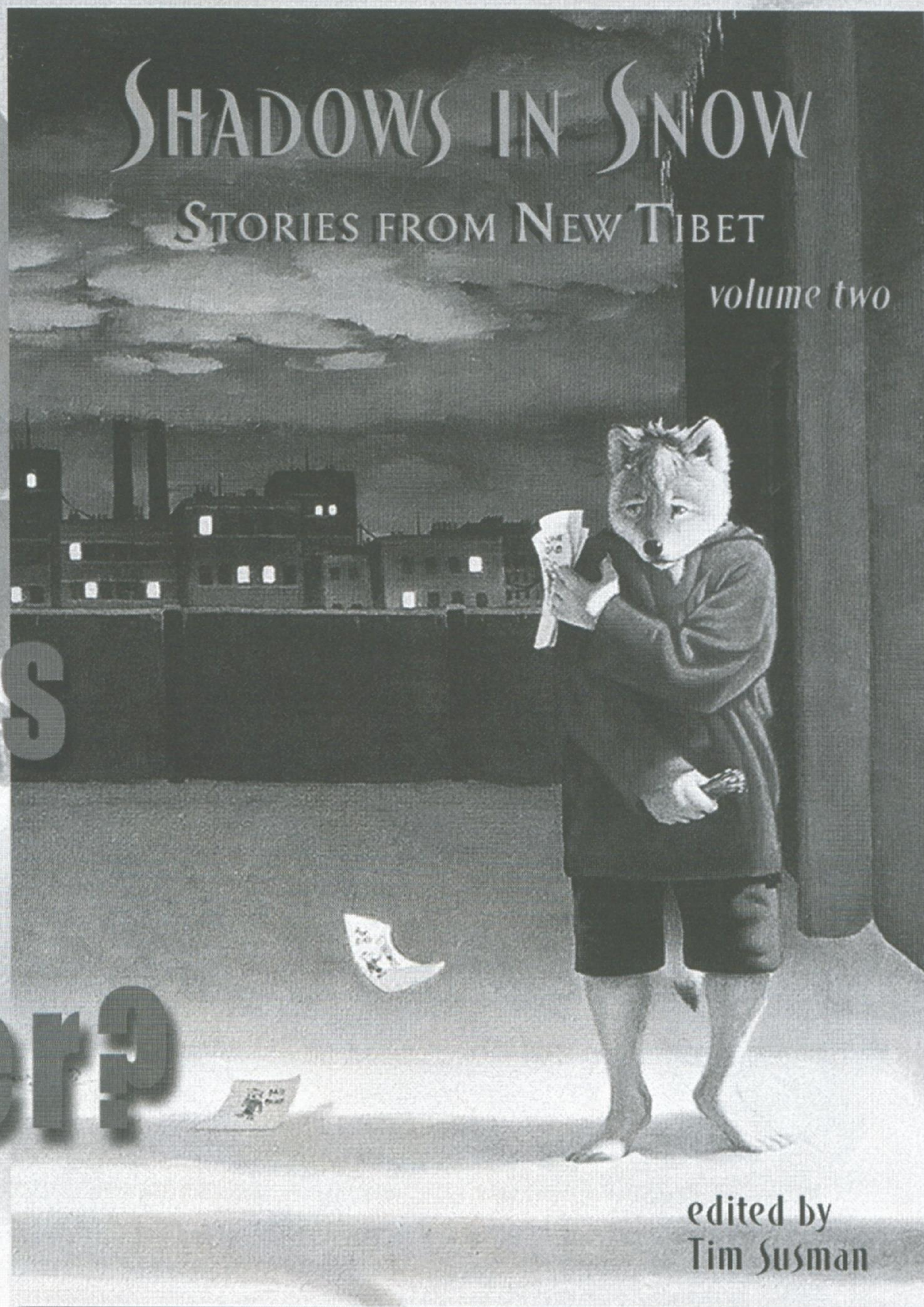
Tamerlane nodded, gestured for her to precede him, then followed her out into the hallway.

Pit didn’t speak the whole trip back, and Tamerlane had to bite his tongue to keep from asking what was wrong.



Are you ready

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edited by
Tim Susman



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The Last Sabretooth

by John Burkitt

illustrated by Cara Mitten

John Burkitt is a 44-year-old Nashvillian who runs a big cat sanctuary. When not writing grant requests (for the lions) or web pages (for a living), he crafts poetry and prose. A Scoutmaster and avid outdoorsman, he enjoys camping and whitewater canoeing.

Cara Mitten is a frequent contributor to *Anthrolations*, and has most recently been doing illustration work for White Wolf and TSR/Wizards of the Coast. She lives in Athens, GA with a snake and multiple birds. Much more of her artwork can be found online at <http://www.yerf.com/mittcara>.

Janice did not watch the video monitor whose expressionless amber spikes measured out the tides of Josh's weakening pulse. Though she was surrounded with doctors and their technology, she was alone in a world of despair with her dying husband.

The Sabretooth morph lay thin and weak upon the impersonal white linen sheets. Once he had easily borne his vixen morph bride to the fresh green grass and stroked her face tenderly. Now he couldn't lift his arm to wipe her tears.

Janice slipped her paw over his and gave it a little squeeze. "I'm sorry it had to end like this," she said simply. Her words concealed a world of hurt.

As the world's only Sabretooth morph, Josh had spent few moments truly alone. His life had been a never-ending series of interviews, tests and measurements. In a sort of medical blackmail, he bought a day or two of privacy at a time by agreeing to another blood sample, another urine sample, another CT-scan. He was admired for *WHAT* he was by everyone. He was loved for *WHO* he was by Janice.

Despite the crushing embrace of his own unwanted fame, Josh had kept his humor and lived his life as a hopeless romantic. And he sought to die the way he lived—one of the things Janice loved about him. He thought briefly of having a Viking funeral, being set adrift in the harbor by moonlight in a burning boat with a sword and bow at his side, but his fear of the ocean made him change his mind. Instead, when he heard that his leukemia was back and that there would be no more reprieves, he formed a new and even more romantic notion.

"Hold me under the stars," he told Janice. "I want to look up through a grove of pines and see

Orion the Hunter looking down on me. I want you to hold me close and let me slip away in your arms. Then burn my body and spread the ashes among the trees. Whenever the wind stirs the leaves they will whisper my love to you. Promise me you won't let me die in a hospital! Promise me!"

She swore to him that if she could not give him the life he wanted, she would at least give him the death he asked for. She had failed to keep her promise, but not because she didn't try.

Leukemia had stolen his life and now the researchers who hounded him at every step were stealing his death. They had argued in Court that the last Sabretooth was a national treasure. That his structure and genetic code could prove invaluable to science. That new drugs and new treatments may blossom from his tragically short life. Perhaps he could even be cloned. So weren't the troubles of Janice and Josh outweighed by the public good? Janice knew full well that the public good was the farthest thing from their mind. She knew their lawyers were paid from the deep pockets of drug companies and universities.

Janice spent her money, her health, and nearly her own sanity to fight for Josh. The home he had fully paid for was now under a second mortgage. One by one their more expensive pieces of furniture had been sold to stave off the bill collectors, and finally Janice's antique silver tea service was sacrificed. She may as well have kept it: her lawyers tried their best but did her no good.

The argument that clones of Josh may have leukemia was not enough to stem the tide. Neither were Josh's supposed civil rights or the raucous protests of his loyal friends in front of the courthouse. And on top of all the broken promises, the final stinging insult was that Hospital would own his body and Janice would never be able to visit his grave. The leaves would never whisper his

love to her. The bitterness she felt could only be pushed aside by the love and grief of the moment. She would hate them later, if there even was a later—at the moment Josh needed her full attention.

In the minute she spared the chaplain, he reminded her of the Catholic position on suicide. Janice reminded him that she was not Catholic. Indeed, after all that had happened to Josh, she was not sure what she believed. How could a just and loving God let this happen?

A couple of security guards outside the room were the final insurance that no one would try to take Josh from the hospital. Indeed, the moment he was pronounced dead he was destined for a trip downstairs to the morgue where he would be frozen in liquid nitrogen. He and the hospital were trapped between anxious researchers and “liberal bleeding hearts” and the staff were taking no chances with their treasure. At least, Janice thought, the real treasure would never be theirs. His soul belonged to her.

“Forgive me,” Janice half whispered, her voice cracking. “Forgive me!”

“Of what?” Josh weakly muttered, his love stronger than the muzzy sleepiness of the strong painkillers he had been given. “Five wonderful years? You got it Jan.”

Her own beauty had somewhat faded from long bedside vigils and sleepless nights. Still, she counted that as nothing, for if Josh ever noticed, he would not mention it for the world.

Janice ran her fingertips along the sunken contours of Josh’s face. His fur was thinning from the chemotherapy and his eyes that had once sparkled were dull and glassy. Still she tried to memorize every color and curve of his yet handsome face. A few photographs and five years of memories had to last a lifetime or he would be gone without a trace. She could *NEVER* let that happen.



Suddenly, someone dressed in surgical scrubs stepped into the room. Though he looked like he belonged with the medical team, his nervous glances and quick movements set him apart.

An orderly asked to see his ID. The stranger had a towel draped over his arm which he removed to reveal an automatic pistol.

“Here’s my freakin’ ID! Everybody get back and no one will be hurt!”

His argument was very persuasive.

Satisfied, he grabbed Janice’s arm roughly and held the gun to her back. “Now you move him onto the gurney and we’ll take a little trip outside. Nice and easy.”

Janice started to remove the IV stand to the gurney, but the gunman grabbed the bottle of glucose and thrust it rudely beside the patient.

Janice pulled the sheet over the weak Sabretooth, catching one last heart rending look from his eyes.

“Don’t hurt her,” Josh said.

“If she’s a good girl, nobody will get hurt.” The gunman grabbed the phone cord and yanked it from the wall. “Let’s go.”

For someone with a gun stuck in her back, Janice made a good attempt at casual behavior, wheeling the gurney out into the hall. She managed to keep a firm grip on herself, especially because she saw an opportunity to use this to her advantage. No matter who he was or what he wanted to do with Josh, he would make a mistake, and it would be his last.

As they headed toward the service elevator, one of the guards grabbed the nurse call phone and said, “Code Brown Alpha, 303 headed North.”

The door to the elevator opened to reveal a startled intern. He was grabbed and rudely thrust out into the hall. He saw the gun. He saw the security guards keeping a cautious but close vigil on the happenings. He ran.

Before the doors closed, the gunman pulled a small canister from his pocket, pulled the pin on it and tossed it with a metallic clang at the feet of the guards. Just as the doors closed, the sharp hiss of escaping tear gas saluted their departure.

The bright red “3” changed to “2”, then to “1” and was about to hit “G” when the elevator rudely stopped between floors.

“They cut it off!”

He fumbled for a key which he put in the fireman’s access switch. With one quick turn, the panel lit up, and with a thump the elevator started down. With a satisfied grunt, the gunman watched the letter “G” light up. Seconds later the doors opened into the dark loading dock.

“What are you doing with us?” Janice asked.

“It’s me,” the gunman said cheerfully. “Don’t you know me, Jan?”

Indeed, a quick move of the face mask revealed her brother Fred’s rakish smile. “Come with me.”

“Fred, are you crazy??”

“No, Sis. Now move it!”

They hurried across the parking lot in the semi-darkness of the mercury vapor lamps to a waiting van. In the front was one of Janice’s outfits pulled over a mannequin. In the back was a large wrapped bundle about the size and shape of Josh.

“They will chase me for a while before I get tired of the game and ditch the van.”

“Where did you get the van?”

"Same place I got the gun. I stole it." He shoved the weapon in her paw and kissed her. "There are instructions I want you to follow to the letter. Now load him in your car, take this map, and get out of here!"

Janice scooped Josh's frail body into her arms and went to her car parked nearby. She waited for Fred's van to make headway down the parking lot, then with the lights off she released the parking brake and coasted down the hill. Only after she had rolled onto the street did she start the engine, turn on the lights, and pull off to the north while her brother screeched tires toward the south.

Hands shaking, she followed the hastily scrawled directions.

Janice had no time for red lights and stop signs. She drove like a vixen possessed, for Josh was going to have his appointment with destiny. Held upright only by the shoulder belt, Josh groaned at the sudden curves and gut-wrenching start-stop driving that sent him careening through the surreal moonlit landscape.

Janice heard sirens shrieking. Her heart nearly stopped as the sound grew closer and there were flashing blue lights and pulsing headlamps ahead. She was sure there would be a pursuit. The cars reached her and passed her by, heading south. Apparently Fred was doing a great job. Good old Fred... how many times Mother had said he wouldn't amount to anything.

"Left on Woodmont for one half mile to the gas station." She found Woodmont, turned, and glanced about in the twin cones of light for a sign. Yes, there was an Exxon station. "Then right on Bramberg."

As she rounded the corner into Bramberg, small gravels spun under the back tires. She felt the car start to fishtail, but she straightened out in time. She found the elementary school, passed it, then headed on toward the second left. A housecat ran into the street, its eyes flaming green with surprise. She swerved to miss it, and the cat made it across the road. She felt the unnatural lurch of a car moving directions it wasn't designed to go. She was sliding across the street...

The car struck the curb with a sickening thud, and one of her tires made an ominous flapping sound. She braked as best she could and eased her crippled car to the side of the road.

Stepping out into the night, Janice walked about the car, shining her flashlight at the under-

side. And there it was, the shredded remains of a tire barely clinging to the steel rim. She could never drive on that.

"Oh God! Not now! Not now!!"

She hurried to the trunk and fished for her keys... they were still in the ignition. So she went back around to the driver's door and reached inside.

The keys would not come out. She was having trouble thinking straight. As she tugged on the keys, cursing them softly, Josh slumped forward, moaning, held up only by his seatbelt. She tried to conceal her panic for his sake. "Everything's going to be ok, honey. Just sit there and be good."

She fought with the keys for a while before remembering that little button by the ignition she had to push in to pull the keys out. One click and they were free.

She ran to the back trunk and looked for the lock. There was none. Then she remembered that the trunk opened by a lever next to the seat.

Bordering on complete panic she went back to the front, groped for the small black lever and pulled it. The trunk obediently popped open. At last!

What she saw dismayed her. Or what she didn't see. There was no spare tire or jack!

She stood there a moment, tears streaming down her face. She was so close to the dark victory she strove for. So close and yet so far. Slowly, quietly, she walked back to the driver's side door. Josh was leaning against the window, looking out. All the better—she could never do what she had to while looking in his large hazel eyes. She quietly picked up the gun in her trembling paw, pulled back the firing pin as silently as she could, and aimed for the back of his head. Her heart pounded so hard she could scarcely breathe. "Hold it together, girl," she whispered. "At least we got this far. At least we got out of that place."

A light came on. Janice looked about and saw it was a front porch light. She had stopped in front of someone's house. Quickly she concealed the gun behind her back.

The door opened and a badger in pajamas and a robe came out. He crossed the yard purposefully and looked at the car, at Janice, and then at the wheel. "Miss, looks like you're screwed up pretty bad."

"Do you have a spare tire?" she sobbed. "I lost mine. I thought we had one."

"My tire wouldn't fit your car. You have one of those foreign jobbies. No spare tire you say?" He

Janice had no time for red lights and stop signs. She drove like a vixen possessed, for Josh was going to have his appointment with destiny.

looked in the trunk, then pulled up the liner in the floor and raised a piece of pressboard. "Looks like a spare tire to me and I bet the jack is under it."

She almost smiled and she almost wept hysterically—perhaps the two emotions kept each other in check. "I've never changed a tire before. Josh used to do that. He could do anything."

"Him?" the badger said, pointing at the passenger.

"Yes," Janice said, tears running down her cheeks. "He's very sick. There's not much time left. Please help us!"

"Ohhhh..." the badger said, stroking his chin whiskers. "I thought you looked familiar."

An awful ten seconds passed which felt more like ten minutes. Then the badger sprang into action. He went to the dashboard, pushed on the hazard light, pulled the parking brake, then went back for the tire. "It won't take a minute, hon. I've done this a dozen times."

It was not hard to believe him. Deftly he slid the jack into the lifting cleat, and using the hook on the tire iron as a handle, he twisted the jack screw and raised the car as if it were nothing.

Janice looked in the window at Josh. "Honey? Joshua?" He wasn't moving, and in a panic she tapped on the glass. After a moment his eyes opened and turned to look at her. "Hold on, baby! It won't be much longer! I love you, you know that! Hold on for me! Don't die!"



The tire incident had wasted valuable time, but she was afraid to drive too quickly. The last stretch of her journey was a gravel road that led back deep into the trees. She passed a sign that said, "Service Road: John Jay State Forest." It was a brilliant location... no one would *EVER* think of looking for them there. She saw a barricade in front of her, a heavy steel pipe gate with a "Road Closed" sign and reflective tape that gleamed in her headlights. She got out and looked for the locking mechanism. There was indeed a large padlock on the gate, but it had the key inside. She knew at once it was more than good luck. "Nothing keeps him out," she muttered gratefully as she lifted the heavy lock from the hasp and pushed open the gate. As soon as her car passed through she made one last trip to put the lock back, pushing it together with a firm click, then she broke the key off in the lock. Janice had shut out the rest of the world, and for the first time in years she had real privacy.

She could not think clearly about Fred or the rash things he did. She had one agenda. She skillfully guided her street car down a road meant for pickup trucks. It would wreak havoc on her suspension, but she was not worried. Indeed, she

saw scrawled at the bottom of the note, "Suggested Alibi..." She felt the gun beside her on the seat. "I have my alibi," she thought.



Josh had lost a great deal of weight. Still, Janice puffed and wheezed as she lugged her precious burden alone over the uneven ground. She remembered the instructions to find the center of a small meadow surrounded by pine trees. When she reached it, she saw that Fred had planned well. There was a perfect spot for her. She found a flashlight, a can of gasoline, a box of matches, a freshly dug shallow pit, all like the note had said.

She settled Josh gently into the grass, sat next to him and took him in her arms. "We made it, Honey. We made it."

He looked up. Indeed, he could see the stars. Maybe it wasn't Orion, but somehow that did not matter anymore. "Yes," he hoarsely whispered. "You did all this for me?"

She did not have the heart to say otherwise. "I would do anything for you. Anything, my love!"

"Anything?"

"I swear."

He took in a labored breath and let it out. "The gun. Don't do anything rash. Fred needs... your help."

"But darling..."

"Promise me!" He became agitated, moaning with discomfort. "Promise!"

"OK, I promise you! I promise!" She kissed him softly. "How do you feel?"

"Fine."

"Liar."

"I had a good teacher," he said with a slight grin.

"I hope you don't mean me," Janice said, her face breaking into a smile.

"It's been so long since you smiled. It's lovely."

Around his wrist was a hospital ID band. She tried to tear it off but it was thin Kevlar plastic. No matter, she had a set of nail clippers on her key ring, and she quickly notched her way through it until it slipped off and fell to the ground. "There. They don't own you anymore. Nobody owns you anymore, and nobody's going to hurt you ever again, baby. Nobody."

She felt him tremble in her embrace and realized that he was cold. She thought first of using some of the wood to start a small fire, but she didn't dare. Someone might spot the blaze before it was needed for other things.

"That gown is awfully thin," she said.

"I'll get by."

"Like hell you will."

She took off her sweater and wrapped it around his shoulders to ward off the gathering

chill. Then she wrapped her arms around him and held him to her breast, rocking him gently as one would comfort a restless child.



Time seemed to stop. The moon passed slowly through the cobalt sky and stars shone with unaccustomed brilliance. If she shivered from the cold, she said nothing about it.

Neither of them spoke. There was too much meaning to frame in words, and no need to say it. Janice looked at the pale remnants of her one true love and remembered a long ago day in November as they huddled together under a newspaper to dodge the icy rain. Even then she looked at the handsome stranger and knew he was the one. He was still handsome to her, only it was her turn to offer shelter. The soft beat of his heart and the tides of his breath were the only hint of life in his tired body, but she clung to him desperately, savoring every last fleeting moment of their life together.

It was perhaps midnight. Her radium dialed watch was hidden beneath his shoulder and she would not release him to read it. Josh moaned softly, then tried to speak.

“What, my love? You said something?”

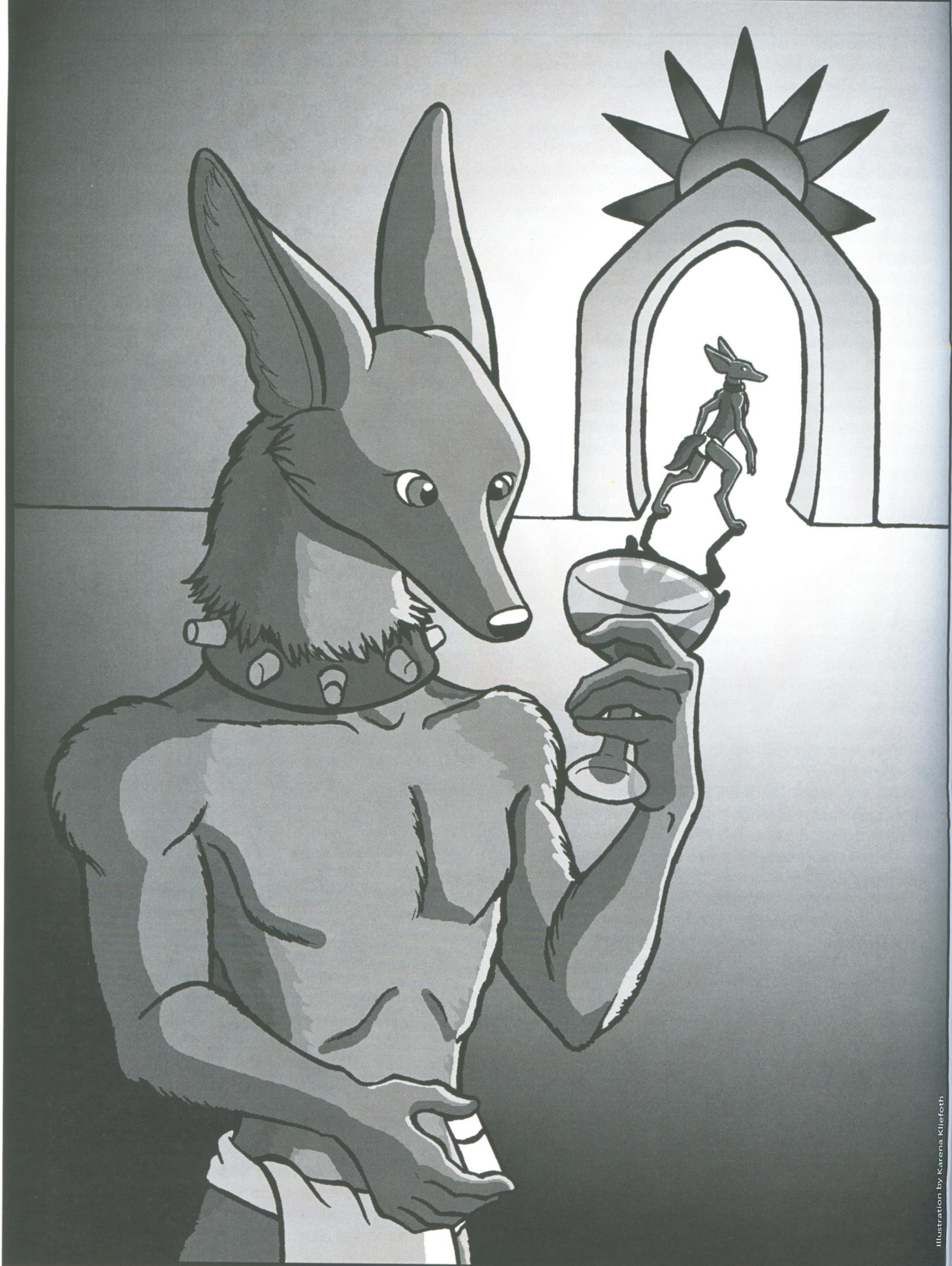
She drew close and heard him take a thin gasping breath. “Love you,” he said as a smile crossed his face. Then his head fell back limply and he soiled himself with urine as his breath left in one protracted sigh. The pulses of his life slowed and stopped.

“Oh Joshua! I love you too!”

Her stomach twisted into knots and where she thought she had cried herself into numb acceptance, fresh tears began streaming down her cheeks. For several moments all she could do was cradle his limp body, holding his wan face against hers. Only the strength of her promise kept her from reaching for the pistol.

There was much to be done before she could properly grieve. It occurred to her to be truly grateful for the wood and the gasoline can—surely there must be a God, and he must be a lot like Fred.





by Tim Susman

illustrated by Karena Kliefoth

Tim Susman was raised by a family of wild foxes in eastern Pennsylvania. At the tender age of seventeen, he was sent out to find his own territory, and wandered from Pennsylvania to Minnesota. After six years (and ten winters), he kept moving westward, finally settling in California when stopped by the Pacific Ocean. He writes and edits stories, reads and analyzes all kinds of databases, and is a non-practicing certified zoologist.

Karena Kliefoth currently resides in Los Angeles, after a tour of Tennessee and Massachusetts. She earned a degree in animation and currently works as a 2D/3D animator at a children's educational software company. She's obsessed with hyenas and Pallas cats and dragons and draws animals every chance she gets.

If you could distill two years of hatred into a vial that would fit in your palm, it would look like this, I thought. The glass vial was warm to the touch; the young jackal whose paws had carried it to me watched, panting, as I unstopped it and poured the green liquid into the goblet of wine. I swirled it around to mix it.

"And this for you." He handed me a small copper vial. The poison was carried in glass, to break easily if it needed to be destroyed. The antidote was less incriminating and could be carried in cheaper, more durable containers.

"You're certain of this?"

"I watched her take it, and then the poison. She poured her doses from the same bowls as she filled these."

I tilted the goblet, watching the liquid shift. "How fast does it work?"

"A paw of minutes."

"What if the antidote is taken in that time?"

He shook his head. "Once the poison is in his system, nothing can stop it. The antidote must be taken in the twenty minutes before the poison is ingested."

"And she took nothing else in the twenty minutes before taking the poison?"

"No, your highness."

I waved off the title. "Save that for tonight, Marrin, if we succeed. You've done very well." His tail wagged, though his expression remained serious. "Now get down to the river and hide yourself for the remainder of the day. You'll know if we succeeded."

He turned to go, then paused and looked back. Yellow eyes met mine anxiously, and though I knew what he was going to ask, I waited to hear him say it. When he did, his voice was low and

trembling. "Will I be damned for this?" His large ears strained to hear my answer.

I had known Marrin for most of my life; he would know if I lied to him. "I don't know. I think that if we only provide the poison and he takes it by his own hand, then his death is not on our souls."

"Even unknowingly?"

It was my turn to pause. "Would you change your course of action if I said yes?"

He licked his muzzle nervously, then sighed. "No."

"Nor I."

"Then may the Brightly Golden guide it to its destination." His voice was barely above a whisper.

"Indeed. Now go!"

I placed the goblet on the tray and took a moment to brush my fur down and straighten the red loincloth I wore. The other jackals wore white or brown, but the king of the lions wanted to show off to everyone that the former king of the jackals was now his personal servant.

Just outside the Great Hall, I opened the copper vial and swallowed its contents. They had a pleasant vegetable taste to them. After tossing the empty vial out a window, I pushed open the great wooden doors and stepped inside.

I'd known this room for as long as I could remember. Some of my earliest memories were of watching my father sitting in his throne on the dais at the far end. To the young cub I was, the hall was as big as the world, and my father presided over it. Now, the intricate mosaics on the walls and floors that had once shown our legends and history were either destroyed or covered with crude rugs. The rank smell of lion permeated everything. One of them had even climbed the walls to take down the silver sconces and the magnificent chandelier, replacing our wax candles with wooden torches that fouled the air and ceiling

with oily smoke. And yet, despite its sorry state, I still loved the room. I could see its true state beneath the squalor, and it was just one more loved one the lions had taken from me, if not the one I missed most.

I knew their treatment of the room was intentional, meant to show their regard for the kingdom they'd conquered so easily. They had lied to us and tricked us, and taken advantage of a moment of weakness. Our so-called allies had deserted us; alone and unprepared, we were no match for a seasoned lion army.

Today, we would show them that there was more to war than brute strength.

Keeping to the sides of the hall, I made my way to the throne. Some thirty other jackals stood in the back of the room. None met my eye as I passed, but I looked over each one of them. Each bore pale gold fur all over his body, save for a darker stripe down the back and bushy tail, and ivory white fur from the lower jaw down to the stomach. Every graceful neck I saw was bound by a cruel leather collar. Cunningly made, it featured several spikes turned inward and a device that allowed them to be tightened, so the lions could torment us at will.

Each jackal wore only the collar and a plain loincloth. The crude garb was intended to remind us of our station, as we worked among the lions who pawed through our beads and finery, wearing what they liked and soiling the rest.

The only eyes that met mine were my brother's. He had tried to talk me out of doing this, and I'd refused to let him. I turned my eyes from his and kept walking. Creif watched me all the way, sitting on the throne he had stolen, beady dark eyes sitting in the fat, bloated muzzle. He wore the robes of his station, but they were little more than animal skins. Unlike

his subjects, he did not deign to wear our clothing. His mane was thick and full, giving him a powerful air, but I knew his muzzle was starting to grey. I watched it every day and imagined it shattering between my teeth.

I never hated before Creif came into my life. Every day he stayed in our kingdom, he destroyed another piece of it. Sometimes he ruined things for me just by looking at them. Not a single day of the past two years had gone by that I didn't imagine Creif's death through some heavenly agent. I invented a different one every day, hoping that if I found the right one, the Brightly Golden would bring it to pass. For two years, our heaven had stayed its hand, leaving our salvation in our paws.

I knelt beside Creif and held up the tray with the goblet on it. "Wine," I muttered.

"Wine, what?" He reached a paw to my collar.

"Wine, your majesty," I said through gritted teeth.

He smiled and patted me on the head. "Good boy. You taste it first."

I took the goblet in my other paw and took a swallow, keeping my eyes down. I was pleased to find that the poison was undetectable. The wine was wonderful.

He reached down and picked up the goblet. I could feel the ears of the jackals straining

to hear him drink, though they dared not look.

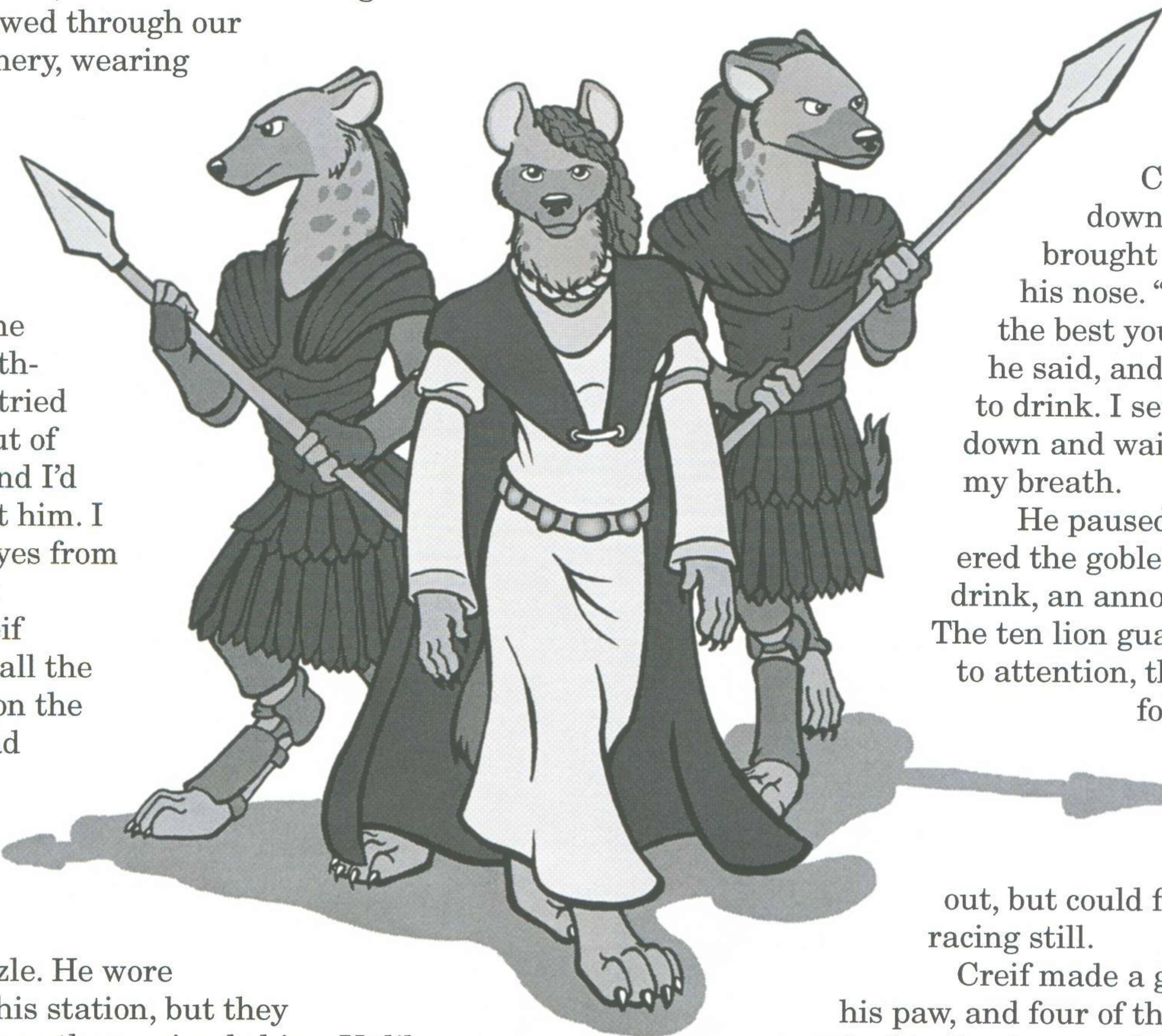
Creif glanced down at me and brought the wine to his nose. "I suppose it's the best you have here," he said, and made as if to drink. I set the tray down and waited, holding my breath.

He paused, then lowered the goblet. "Before I drink, an announcement!" The ten lion guards snapped to attention, the jackals following a bit

more slowly. I let my breath

out, but could feel my heart racing still.

Creif made a gesture with his paw, and four of the lion guards marched to the doors and out of the



hall. This, I hadn't expected. The other jackals abandoned their composure and crowded behind the guards, tilting heads and ears to follow their progress. I listened, but didn't dare move my head to look.

"This is to be a day of change in the Lion Principality of Aurelia." He rolled the words off his tongue with such obvious enjoyment that my fists clenched, as they always did. "I must return to my home in the great city of Carragorum. I miss its sweeping vistas, its grand plazas, its glorious architecture, and its delightful citizens." Each word was calculated to twist the collars around our hearts. "But fear not. I will not leave you without an able leader." He made another small gesture. One guard made his way through the jackals to the doors, and began to open them.

This time I looked. Three hyenas in leather armor walked through the doors, clearing a path through the jackals for another, smartly dressed in flowing robes and a golden necklace. Two more hyena guards flanked her. I heard the jackals murmuring and silently exhorted them to stay calm. The Regent seemed to enjoy the attention; at least, I could see a rather smug smile on her muzzle. I glanced back at Creif, and he was smiling the same smile, watching my reaction. "This is hardly the last surprise I have for you today," he said in a low tone, then addressed the crowd. "I give you the Lady Taranis Madirof, a noble of the Plains clan, and the new Regent of the Lion Principality of Aurelia."

Taranis stood half a foot taller than the tallest jackal, and her dark muzzle was proud enough that even among the taller lions, she did not seem diminished. She bowed, twenty feet from the throne, while her guards surrounded her. They did not, I noted, trust the lions any more than the jackals. "It is an honor to serve you, your Majesty," she said.

Creif smiled and raised his goblet. "Lady Taranis, I would drink a toast to your health." Again, I held my breath. "Except that I do not believe it would be to my health." He turned to me and emptied the goblet onto the steps. Poisoned wine ran around my paws, seeping between my toes.

I was a bit surprised, more disappointed. I put on a shocked expression. "But I tasted it first."

"And no doubt took the antidote just outside." He set the goblet on the tray beside the throne and waved a paw. The guard at the doors opened them again. "We have sharper ears than you might think. We hear many goings-on in our castle."

The four guards who had left earlier reappeared, dragging two figures along with them. Two of them stayed back with one figure, while the others brought their captive forward. I couldn't see the one in back, but the one in front was another hyena. I hadn't expected this. The hyena had spotted Taranis and was pleading with her. Taranis looked on impassively.

Some of the jackals in the back were murmuring anxiously. I started worrying about who the other captive was. Before I could think about it too much, Creif was speaking again. "Don't recognize the alchemist who made your poison for you?"

The alchemist! Then the other captive must be Marrin. I said a silent apology and prayer to the Light for him.

"We didn't expect you would recognize her," Creif went on. "But we'll get to that in a moment. First, she must be punished for her part in this attempt on the royal life. Guards, execute her."

"What?" she yelped. "Lady Taranis, please!" Taranis folded her arms and remained silent.

One lion guard approached her, while the two holding her forced her to her knees. The third knelt in front of her and grabbed her muzzle with one paw, holding it up in the air while she whimpered. With a savage stroke, he took his short sword and plunged it into her gut, then forced it up the body. The jackals all looked away; I tried to, but Creif grabbed my muzzle in one paw and held it. I closed my eyes, but he hissed, "If you don't open those eyes, I'll open them with my claws." I opened them and watched the alchemist die. It took several minutes.

One of the lions bent toward the mass of entrails that covered the floor. Creif let my muzzle go. "No! Do not feed on traitor's blood." The guard froze, then slunk back to his position.

Creif turned back to me. "We know there was another involved. You will tell us the name."

"Why don't you just kill me?" I snarled at him.

He smiled and shook his head. "I will not be baited, cur. It is still important to me that everyone see what a good slave you are. No, we know how to make you suffer without any physical harm. You will tell us who the other traitor is, and then you will watch him die. And I promise you it will not be as quick or as easy."

"Then why should I tell you?"

He motioned with his paw. The other two guards came forward. Their captive was smaller, a jackal. It was—

"Lady Taranis, I would drink a toast to your health." Again, I held my breath. "Except that I do not believe it would be to my health."

"Because if you do not, then that fate will befall your daughter."

Kyeria.

I couldn't help moaning. Creif smiled, and I saw teeth this time. "You thought she would be safe in the kitchens. You were right—for a while. It took us two years, but we found her just a couple weeks ago. The last royal we were missing. We saved her for this special occasion."

Kyeria was holding up bravely. I knew what I had to do.

"Marrin. In the kitchens." I prayed he'd had time to get away.

Creif smiled and waved a paw. Two of his guards left the hall. "Any others? On your daughter's life?"

A bit of improvisation was in order. I remembered a jackal we'd buried two days ago. Creif wasn't likely to know his name. "Angion."

"And where does he work?"

In the fields of the Brightly Golden. "The flats below the castle." I made my voice a low, defeated whisper.

Creif laughed and waved his paw. Two more guards left the hall. One remained by the

door, two held Kyeria. Only three attended the king. "This is the weakness of you jackals. So enamored of life." He leaned closer to me. "I don't believe for a moment that you have given me the right names. But you will."

I growled softly. "You will not harm my daughter." My stomach was churning and my fur starting to stand up.

The growl caught the attention of the three closest guards. They turned toward me.

Creif's eyes widened slightly, and then his expression darkened. "Just for that, I think I will. You have obviously forgotten who your lord and master is, filthy cur."

"My lord is Aurum the Brightly Golden, you disease-ridden, mangy, sorry excuse for a ruler!" With the last word, I kicked the empty goblet against the throne. It hit with a loud retort and rattled down the steps behind me. Creif's muzzle

was wrinkled in anger, his teeth drawn back in a snarl, and his ugly brown eyes were locked onto mine. Good. He wouldn't be thinking about Kyeria. Nor would his guards be looking behind themselves.

"You piece of gutter trash. I am more of a ruler than you will ever be. Who wears the collar?" He reached for my collar.

In the brief span of time it took him to say those last four words, three gurgling coughs echoed through the throne room. Creif grasped my collar before the sounds had registered, and then we both turned to look. Three hyenas stood

over the bodies of the closest three lion guards, whose throats were spilling their foul blood onto the floor. The two guards holding Kyeria dropped her with a shout and leapt forward; both received a saber in the chest before they could draw their weapons. The crowd of jackals drew back to let the five hyena guards advance on the last lion, shrinking in terror against the door.

"What is this?" Creif bellowed.

"Taranis!"

Taranis smiled at him and then inclined her head

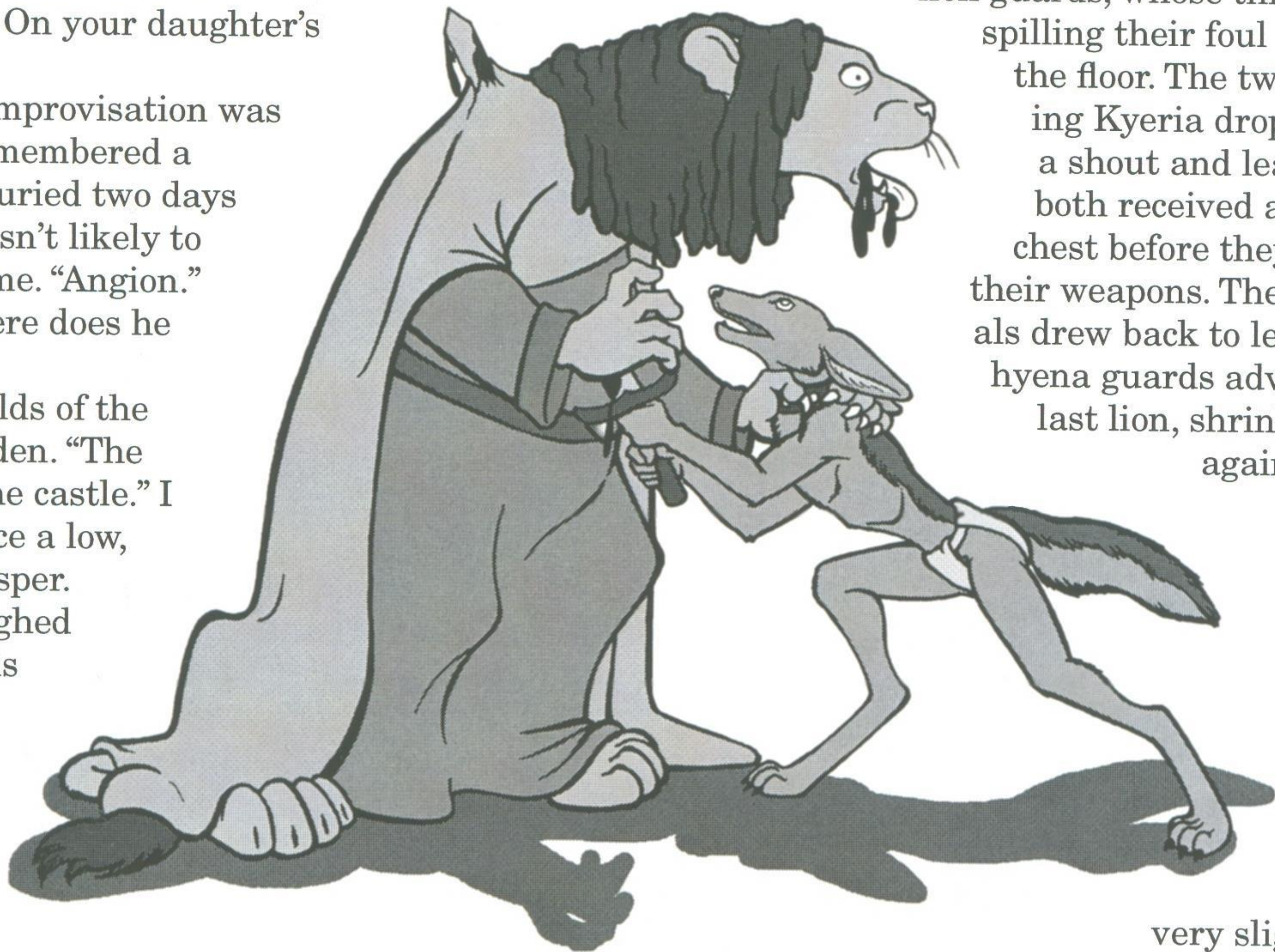
very slightly in my

direction.

He didn't understand. He hadn't felt me draw his sword. "What is the meaning of this?" He noticed her gaze then, and turned, slowly, back to me. I touched the point of his sword to his ribcage.

"You should be more careful with your things," I said softly, and allowed myself to smile. My muscles sang with the hatred of all the jackals in the room, focused on this one lion. Only my heart held me back. Kill him and you damn yourself, it said. One action, and you will never see the fields of the Brightly Golden. But I had already made the decision to trade my soul for my people. The blade sliced easily through his ribs.

"Godless... cur," he gasped, blood starting to foam in his mouth. "I'll take you... to hell... with me." I twisted the sword inside him; he twisted at my collar, driving the spikes into my neck—or so he thought.



The collar fell apart in his paw. He stared at it with dying, uncomprehending eyes.

"For Kyrush, and Marka. For Aurelia," I said, and that was the last thing he heard in this world.

"And for Baradoc, my mother," Taranis said. I hadn't even heard her approach. She spat in his dead face.

I dropped the sword and stared at it. Lion's blood dripped from my paws. I could hardly believe what I'd done. Numb, I looked around the hall. Kyeria was safe in my brother's arms. Some jackals were hugging and removing each other's collars, their celebration tempered by the gory scene. Some were just staring at me, registering the same disbelief I felt. I saw the sign of prayer made several times, and though I no longer had the right to answer, I knew they were praying for me, and that made it easier. Watching the collars fall to the ground made it easier still.

At the other end of the hall, the hyena guards were tearing apart what was left of the last lion. I shuddered and turned back to Taranis. She touched my collar with her foot. "I don't believe it was a lucky chance that this broke."

I shook my head. "They were so proud of their collars. It was not difficult to figure out how they work and dismantle them. But it was important to wear it, otherwise he might have tried to harm me some other way and been more successful."

She nodded. "I confess I do not understand your adoration of life either, but I admire your willingness to overcome it." She looked down at Creif. "The lions will not venture outside their lands again for some time. It was well planned."

"Thank you for playing your part. I thought I might be in danger for my life for a moment."

"Of course not. If you died, your people would be less inclined to give us our reward, I believe."

"A subtle reminder." I smiled. "Take your spoils, the treasures of Aurelia. We are content to have our kingdom back."

"We will take what we can carry," she said, a veiled implication that it was not all worth taking.

I gritted my teeth. "I hope your other soldiers were able to carry out their orders."

"I have confidence."

My stomach was still knotted with the tension of the moment. "This has been long overdue."

"Indeed. We have been waiting to avenge our dead for four years." Her dark eyes searched mine. "At least we both understand revenge."

"This is not our way." I looked at the lion again. The hate was only starting to fade. "We can maim, but we are forbidden to take life. This time, it was the only avenue left to us."

"Yet you had rather more cause than we did. The rumor is that you, your daughter, and your brother are all that is left of your royal family."

"Our mates were both killed." I narrowed my eyes. There was no more hatred in the memory, only a lingering sadness.

"Lucky that you were not. Creif made a prideful mistake in leaving you alive, and he paid for it. No other would be able to lead the jackals. I understand your brother is a simple storyteller."

I caught my brother's eye and smiled. He grinned back at me. "You flatter me." I beckoned two other jackals up to my side, noticing as I did that Creif's blood was drying on the fur of my paws. I left it there. It didn't seem worthwhile to clean it off.

The jackals, Jarek and Ferril, drew back from my stained paws at first. They looked into my eyes and then deliberately stepped close in behind me, keeping their eyes on Taranis.

Taranis eyed them back. "Don't trust me?"

"I would be a fool to, wouldn't I?" I smiled. "I hope you will not be offended if I don't drink your health."

She laughed harshly. "Of course not. It would seem that your reputation is well-earned."

I bowed my head appreciatively. "I suppose you will be wanting to gather your guard and leave before the sun sinks too low."

"Don't tell me you're tiring of my company already?" It was hard to read her expression through the dark fur.

"Of course not, Lady Taranis. But we know how long a trip lies before you. We did not want to delay you."

"We have planned well. We thought we might share a meal with you before returning."

The door at the end of the hall opened and two hyena guards walked in. Taranis turned toward them. "All done?"

They bowed to her and nodded. "There are two lions barricaded in a storeroom. The rest are disposed of."

Smiles broke across the jackals' muzzles, and tails wagged freely, but the specter of death still muted the celebration. Tomorrow, or the next day, we would accept the death that Aurum sent us and give voice to our joy. I bowed to Taranis. "I apologize for any doubts I had about your soldiers."

She smiled. "No offense taken."

Jarek, behind me, said softly, "Perhaps we should clean up the hall."

"My soldiers will help you," Taranis said.

I nodded, watching her as she stepped down and began giving orders. Whether it was still the tension of the moment or that I didn't trust her, I

was still feeling nervous. She had willingly double-crossed Creif to help us, and the reward we offered should have been ample. Why, then, did I feel this was not yet over?

Taranis climbed back onto the dais, keeping a respectful distance from me. “Fortunately, most of the mess is theirs,” she said, looking at the remains of the alchemist.

I shook my head. “I don’t know how you could stand there and watch one of your people be gutted like prey.”

“Sacrifice is sometimes necessary. I don’t expect that you, with your love of life, understand that.”

“She didn’t seem a willing sacrifice.”

“Necessary nonetheless.”

I was starting to suspect something. The tension in my stomach was spreading to my knees. I leaned against the throne and watched Taranis’s inscrutable smile. “Why necessary?”

“To gain Creif’s trust. He would not have allowed my guards in here otherwise.”

“You told him about her? How did you find out?”

“I have my sources.” Her tail swished slowly from side to side.

A thud from the floor drew our attention. One of the hyenas had dropped to one knee and was holding her head.

Taranis looked sharply at me and then put a paw to her own head. Her eyes narrowed. “It would appear we underestimated you.” The other hyenas were clutching their heads as well. One made it to the lowest step of the dais before collapsing.

I smiled. “I hope you enjoyed your meal this morning. You understand we could not allow you to walk off with our treasures.”

She reached out to me, but the drug held her muscles back. Jarek didn’t even have to take a step.

“Don’t worry, it’s not fatal,” I said. “We will escort you to the border. I suggest you keep going from there.” My smile twisted into a frown as pain gripped my stomach briefly.

Taranis saw my expression and smiled. “How are you feeling?” I stared at her. “What a shame it would be if the alchemist made a mistake. A simple delaying agent could easily be mistaken for an antidote.”

“She took some,” I whispered. Jarek put a paw on my shoulder. I saw my brother’s look of concern as he started forward.

“Of course she did. You would hardly trust her otherwise.” Her words were becoming slower and slurred.

I fought the pain in my stomach as the cramping spread to other muscles. “You switched the potions.”

“Why would I do such a thing?” Her eyes gleamed with triumph.

“To kill the king of the jackals.” My brother had reached us. His eyes glowed with anger as he spoke. “Because if you acted directly to kill him, you would be captured. If he were simply poisoned, in the course of this plan, nobody could blame you. With the alchemist dead at the lions’ paws, there was no other evidence of treachery. And the hyenas would take Aurelia.”

She saw that there was no more use in dissembling, and stopped fighting the numbing influence of the drug.

Her head rolled back on her shoulders and she laughed. “And so they shall! I may die, but my name will be spoken in the Rituals with the great heroes. Who will lead you with your great king gone?”

The cramps seized me, doubling me over and drawing a yelp of pain. Kyeria ran to me and threw her arms around me. “Uncle Kerrin!”

“Uncle?” Taranis stared at us. I crooked an arm around the cub and nuzzled her. My brother stepped forward.

My brother, the king of the jackals, spoke.

“You have failed, Lady Taranis, through the courage and foresight of my brother Kerrin, the ‘simple storyteller.’” He drew her eyes to him, standing tall and proud, every inch the king I could never have been. “You and your guards will carry your name back to the halls of your royalty, to be spoken of with laughter and jeers, to be mocked and disgraced as the hyena noble who was beaten by a bunch of unarmed jackals.” Her eyes grew wider and wider. He turned to Jarek. “Escort them to the border, as we planned. But first, cut their tongues out and sear their noses.” Jarek nodded, but didn’t move, looking down at me. My brother spoke again, more gently. “Go. I will attend to him.”

Jarek removed his paw, but I caught and held it briefly before he went. I glimpsed tears in his eyes before he turned away from me.

“No...” Taranis couldn’t produce any more words.

“Get rid of her.” Two jackals hurried up to drag her off the dais as he knelt beside me.

“Sacrifice is sometimes necessary. I don’t expect that you, with your love of life, understand that.”

"You see, Rekhi," I said. "I was right after all." The words were harder and harder to pull out as my muscles tightened and cramped up. The fire in my stomach was almost unbearable. I held it in.

He just shook his head. "I have never wished so hard that you were not." The words were hard for him, too, but for a different reason. "I should never have let you switch places with me this morning."

"This is right," I said. "My soul...is as stained as my body. You are still pure. Golden."

"Aurum will forgive you."

"Will he? I don't know," I managed through the cramps in my jaw. "But we're free. We won."

He nodded, but his tears were flowing more freely. "I would give it all back just to have you at my side again." His voice cracked, and then he put his arms around me, too, feeling every spasm of my tortured muscles. Kyeria was crying openly as she leaned against me.

"No." My voice was muffled against his fur. "Taranis was... wrong. I understand... sacrifice." I strained to draw breath. "Even knowing... I would... do it again." He drew his muzzle back and looked at me, his golden fur streaked with tears. I could see the jackals in the hall behind him on their knees, heads bowed. "Only... you will have to find... someone else... to tell... my story."

He tried to laugh at that. "Nobody could do it justice, my brother." His laugh ended in a sob, and then in a howl as he pressed against me again. Kyeria howled with him, and the rest of the jackals joined in for the space of many heart-

beats, singing for me. I had howled for others many times, but I hadn't thought how strange it would be to be howled for. It was a beautiful song, and took my mind off the pain, even when it was over. Kyeria and Rekhi were the last to leave it, sobbing quietly.

I shuddered again, almost throwing them from me, but the pain was fading further still. "Soon now," I whispered. My eyes searched the walls and roof of the hall. "Rekhi... make it... beautiful again."

"I swear by Aurum, I will, in your name. I will never be able to repay what you've done. I love you."

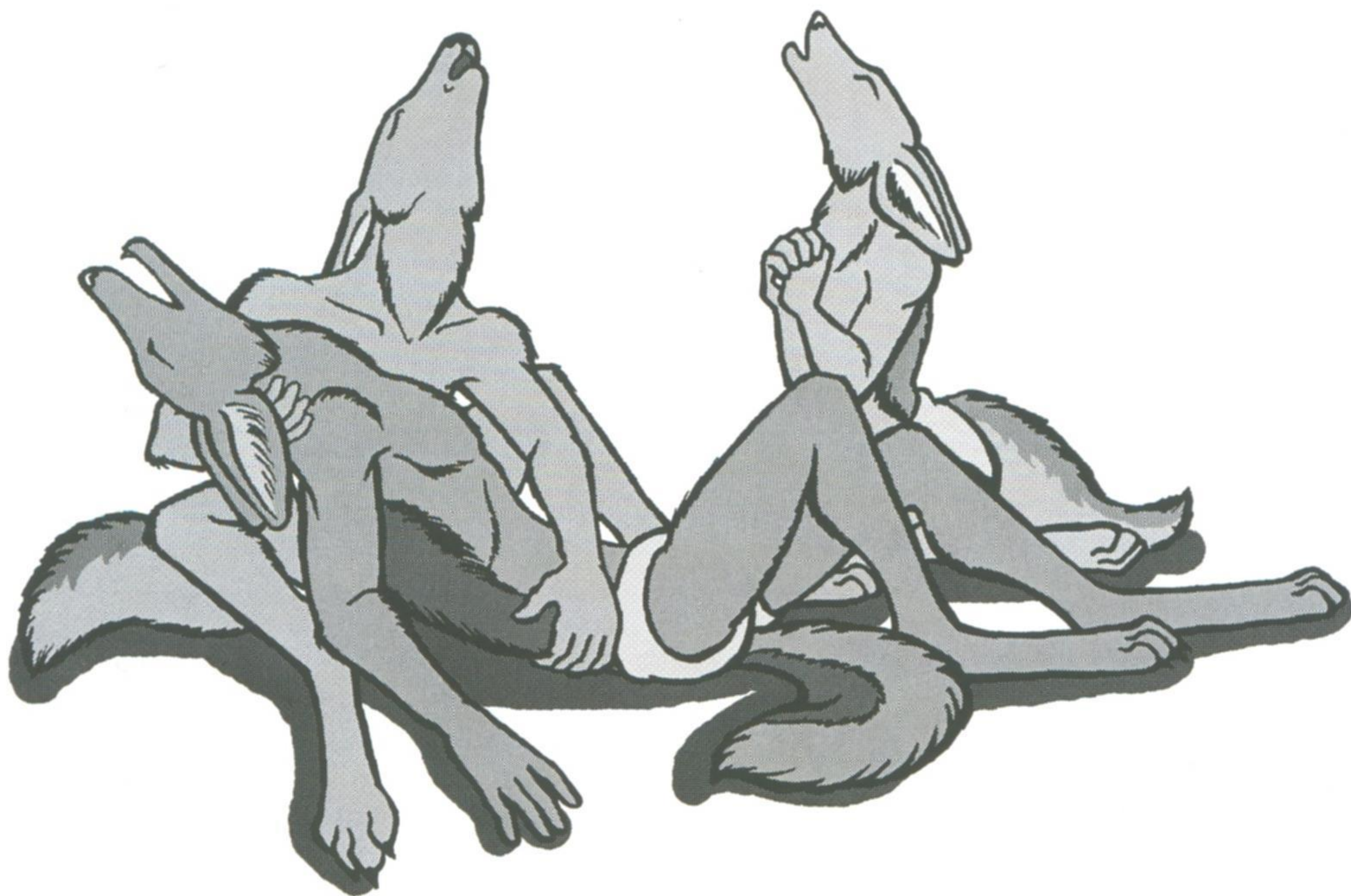
I waited through another spasm. It was so much trouble to breathe. Points of light drew my eyes upward. "I love you, Rekhi... oh. You put... the torches back already."

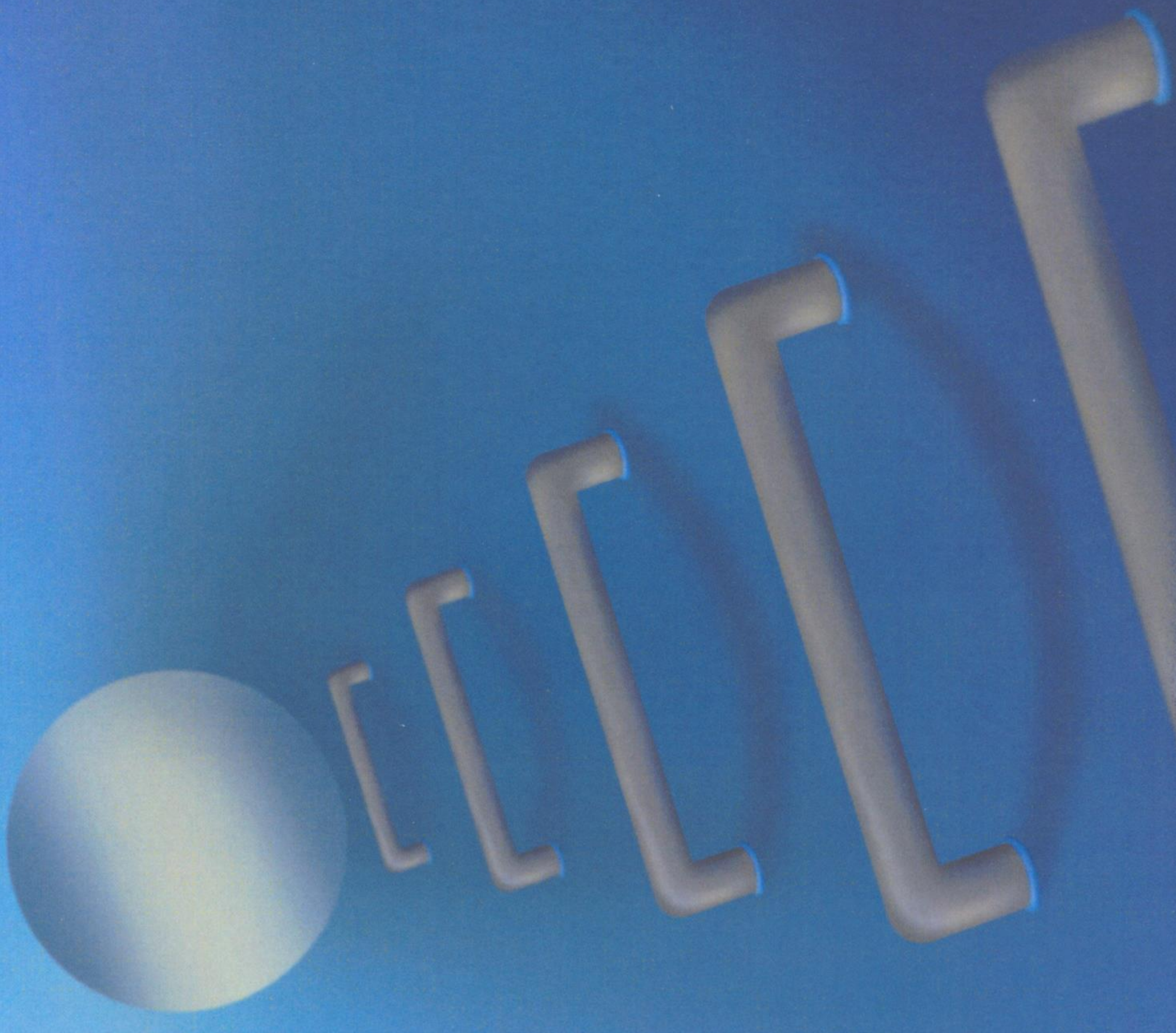
"Wh—?"

"They look nice. So bright. Just like... I remember."

"Oh, Kerrin." He just held me. The warmth was nice.

Light blazed above me. "And... the chandelier. Look... how brightly... golden..."



A blue sphere is positioned to the left of a series of connected pipes. The pipes start as a single vertical line, then branch out into a series of connected L-shaped segments, resembling a staircase or a zigzag pattern, extending towards the top right corner of the image. The background is a solid blue color.

“Maybe you know all there is to know about pipes, but when it comes to bombs, I’ll trust Cheever: tech’s her specialty.” The contempt that came into her black, unblinking eyes then made him swallow, let her go, look away. “And your loyalty should be to the ship, doggie, not to any one person on board.”

Snapping on a headset, Pit pulled a sonic probe from her pack and pressed it to the side of the duct, the high-pitched buzz tickling Tamerlane’s ears. “Any clang that isn’t ship-ceramic and shouldn’t be there, we investigate.”

Anger tightened his throat, but Tamerlane swallowed it. She was right: he had a very specific job to do. A quick sniff to get his bearings, and Tamerlane gestured down the ductwork to the left.

**From "Fish Gotta Swim"
by Michael H. Payne**